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THE CASTAWAYS

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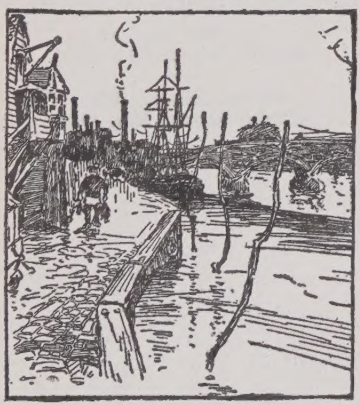
BY

W. W. JACOBS



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THE CASTAWAYS

The Castaways

CHAPTER I

MR. WILLIAM POPE closed his ledger with a slam and, slipping from his stool, locked the drawer of his desk and returned the key to his pocket. It was just one o'clock, and there was an ebb and flow of clerks returning from, and going to, lunch. It had been an everyday scene to Mr. Pope for thirty years; he looked forward to another ten and then a pension, which he fondly hoped to enjoy for thirty more. He walked slowly across the big room and, putting his head round a glass and mahogany screen, eyed with clerkly disapproval the industry of a man working there.

"One o'clock, Carstairs," he said sharply.

Mr. Carstairs turned a lean, clean-shaven face on his friend and smiled amiably.

"Just coming," he said, blotting his work. "I had no idea it was so late."

Mr. Pope grunted. "I should know it in the

dark," he declared, "without a watch. I believe you like work, Carstairs."

The other shook his head. "Just a habit," he said slowly. "There's not much to like about it. Come along, before you faint."

He led the way out of the bank into the crowded, sunlit street, and, seizing an opportunity, darted across the road. Mr. Pope, with a finer sense of his dignity, waited until the traffic was held up, and crossed ponderously.

"One of these days——" he began.

"I know," said his friend, "but I feel like a boy to-day. Twenty-five years dropped from my shoulders this morning and left me a boy of twenty."

"Pity the grey hairs didn't drop too," remarked Mr. Pope.

"One thing at a time," said the other. "And, after all, I haven't got many."

He stopped at the entrance to the Beech Tree, and, pushing through the swing-doors, led the way up to the dining-room, and to the end table they usually occupied. Mr. Pope seated himself with a sigh of content, and, placing a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez across his nose, studied the menu.

"Plate of mulligatawny," he said slowly, "boiled silverside, tankard of bitter."

He ate his meal with enjoyment, and then, light-

ing a cigar and ordering coffee, disposed himself for conversation. Carstairs, who had eaten but little, answered in such an abstracted fashion that Mr. Pope, in a fit of pique, closed his mouth with his cigar and lapsed into silence.

"I'm sorry," said Carstairs, turning, with a slight laugh. "I was thinking."

"Think away," said his friend coldly.

"Thinking of the many times I have eaten in this place," said Carstairs. "Day after day, year after year. It has all passed like a dream."

"Best way for a lunch to pass," said Pope, with feeling. "If you had poor Hall's digestion——"

"I mean the whole thing," said Carstairs. "The morning train, the day's work. For twenty-five years, rain or shine, I have been shut up in that office taking care of other people's money. Now I am my own master. I can stay in bed all day, or go to the North Pole if I like."

Mr. Pope took his cigar from his mouth and regarded him thoughtfully. "You had better stay in bed all day," he said at length. "Or perhaps two or three days would be better."

"This is my last day at the office," said Carstairs. "I can hardly realise it."

"Don't try to," said Pope anxiously.

"To-morrow morning I shall go birds'-nesting."

"What—in October?" stammered the unhappy Pope.

"Or a motor run," said Carstairs, hiding a smile. "If it's a day like this it will be splendid. I'll ask for a day's leave for you. I bought a ripping car yesterday."

Mr. Pope stifled a groan. "We had better be getting back," he said, rising.

"Back!" said the other. "Why, we have got twenty-five minutes yet. Sit down and discuss where we shall go. You needn't be alarmed; I am not going to drive. What do you say to Brighton? Run down to lunch, spend a couple of hours by the sparkling sea, and then home to dinner and a theatre."

Mr. Pope turned and looked long and hard at his friend. "Look here, Carstairs," he said at last, "do you know what you are talking about?"

"About a motor run," said the other.

"In your own car?" pursued Pope.

Carstairs nodded.

"Where did you get it?"

"Bought it."

Mr. Pope sighed, but pursued his cross-examination. "How much?"

"Nine hundred and twenty-five pounds," was the reply.

There was a long pause, during which Mr. Pope tried hard to get his voice under control.

"Where did you get the money?" he asked at last, in fairly even tones.

"Ah, now you're getting to business," said Carstairs, smiling broadly. "It was left to me by an uncle I haven't seen since I was ten. He went to Australia sheep-shearing. Judging by the amount I'm rather afraid he must have been shearing his fellow men as well."

Pope, still looking doubtful, cleared his throat.

"Much?" he inquired.

Carstairs nodded. "I'm afraid to tell you the amount," he said quietly. "You might ask me to go and see a doctor."

"How much?" demanded the other.

"Or fall off your chair."

"How *much?*" repeated the other severely.

"We don't know exactly," said Carstairs, fumbling in his pocket, "but in this letter from my lawyers they say about thirty thousand a year."

Conversation in the room was suspended until the echoes of Mr. Pope's exclamation had died away. With a trembling hand he took the letter and read it, and then for the first time in many years he had a glass of water with his lunch. After which he congratulated Mr. Carstairs.

"But you've known this some time," he said reproachfully.

"About three weeks," said Carstairs. "But I wanted to be absolutely certain before I said anything about it."

"What are you going to do with it all?" demanded the amazed Pope.

Carstairs pretended to consider. "I shall keep a few fowls, I think," he said at last, "*and* the motor."

Mr. Pope shook his head gloomily. "It'll be thrown away on you," he said. "You never have had any idea of real enjoyment. You'd have been much better off if the old man had left you five hundred a year. You've got simple tastes."

"Simple things cost the most, I believe," said Carstairs. "My car doesn't make nearly such an important noise as a second-hand one at fifty pounds. A ten-guinea suit of clothes escapes observation, whereas one at twenty-five shillings attracts attention wherever it goes."

Mr. Pope, who was not listening, raised his finger for the waiter. "Two glasses of the best and oldest port you've got. I want to see what it feels like to stand treat to a man with thirty thousand a year," he said, after the waiter had departed. "You'll drop all your old friends now."

"Of course," said Carstairs simply. "I shall begin with you—after I have drunk the port."

Mr. Pope clinked glasses, and then with a gentle sigh sipped his wine.

"You'll have to be careful," he said, after a long silence. "There are heaps of people who will be anxious to help you spend that money. You're too easy-going by half to be trusted with it. I can see you investing it in all sorts of wild-cat schemes, not because you believe in them, but because you will be unable to say 'No.'"

"Perhaps you're right," said Carstairs.

"I'm certain of it," said his friend vehemently. "You've got no knowledge of the world, and you have a trust in human nature that I can only describe as child-like. I shouldn't be surprised if you lost everything you've got in five years."

"I reckoned ten," said Carstairs, "but I dare say you are nearer the mark. However, I will relieve your mind by telling you that I am taking measures to prevent it. I am engaging a man to look after my affairs, and if I crack up in a few years he will be responsible. I shall practically leave things in his hands."

"Leave things in his hands?" gasped the amazed Pope. "And suppose he lets you down?"

"He won't," said Carstairs.

The other looked at him with unaffected concern. "Don't do it," he said earnestly. "Don't do it."

"I must," said Carstairs. "I can't be bothered with business matters. I might as well stay on at the bank. It's no use, Pope, I'm quite determined."

"You must be crazy," said Pope at last. "What do you know about him? How long have you known him?"

"Long enough to know he is all right," said the other. "But you know him better than I do."

"I!" said Pope, starting. "I don't know anybody I'd trust to that extent. Who is it?"

"His name is William Pope," said Carstairs.

Mr. Pope's expression changed suddenly, and his mouth broke into tremulous smiles. Then his face began to harden again.

"It's no use," said Carstairs, who had been watching him closely. "It's a favour to myself. You've got a very clear head for business, and a stronger way of dealing with people than I have."

Mr. Pope shook his head.

"And you know what things are better than I do," pursued Carstairs. "You can help me to keep my end up. There's an air about you, Pope, that I haven't got. I want some of your moral support. I want you to tell my lies for me, and intervene

between myself and people who want to help me spend my money."

"If you put it that way——" began the other, wavering.

"It's the only way to put it," said Carstairs. "It's a pure matter of business; friendship doesn't count at all. We'll have a contract drawn up by my solicitors all shipshape and proper, and then I shall be able to enjoy my money while you have all the trouble of it."

Pope turned in his chair and extended his hand.

"That's settled," said Carstairs, "and I'm willing to give you the pleasure again of paying for a wealthy friend's port to celebrate it."

Mr. Pope held up to the waiter a beckoning finger that seemed to have increased in size and importance since the last order. He turned an eye on a clock that no longer had any message for him, and, raising his glass, toasted "Our very good healths."

The return to the office was effected without hurry. Haste was all very well for men whose horizon was bounded by streets and the regular performance of mechanical duties; free men with the pleasant places of the world before them could afford to take their time. In front of the very entrance of the bank, Mr. Pope, pleasantly con-

scious of being twenty-five minutes late, loitered to purchase a buttonhole. His appearance was so dignified that the colleague who had been impatiently awaiting his return in order to go to his own lunch ventured on no greater reproach than a sniff.

CHAPTER II

THE dislocation caused in a large office by the retirement of two of its staff is not great, and any inconvenience occasioned is amply atoned for by the consequent promotions. The two clerks left with the good wishes of their fellows, although there was a little uncertainty—due to the bearing of Mr. Pope—as to which of them was the fortunate legatee.

The secretary entered upon his duties at once. He had innumerable consultations with the lawyers (cheerfully acquiesced in by those excellent men of business), and, with knowledge gleaned from "Every Man His Own Lawyer," propounded conundrums that took the united intellects of the firm to solve.

Nor were the lighter branches of his work neglected. Gently but firmly he made the reluctant Carstairs renounce the firm of City tailors who had dressed him for twenty years, and all their works, and piloted him to a West End house where the charges were three times as great.

"To be well dressed is half the battle," he said severely as he followed Carstairs into a restaurant to recuperate after their labors. "What about that little table at the end?"

"That's taken, sir," said the waiter. "The next one is not engaged."

Mr. Pope frowned, and, after a moment's hesitation, took the proffered chair and began to study the menu. He made his selection after much questioning, using his forefinger in preference to the pitfalls of the French language.

He broke his roll and looked around him with placid content. The Beech Tree Tavern seemed to belong to a remote and uncongenial past. His gaze roved from pretty women and well-groomed men to the small orchestra in the gallery. He turned with a smile to see the *hors d'œuvres* at his elbow.

The occupant of the reserved table appeared just as Mr. Pope was toying with a sweetbread: a tall, well-knit young man of about twenty-five, who took the chair which backed on to Mr. Pope's with so much vigour that a piece of sweetbread changed its destination at the last moment, and, leaving a well-defined trail down that gentleman's shirt-front, hid inside his waistcoat.

"Sorry," said the young man, moving his chair

forward an inch. "They don't leave much room here."

"Plenty of room for people who know how to use it," said Pope crisply.

The other smiled amiably and watched with some interest the efforts of Mr. Pope to find the missing morsel. His interest increased as the latter, in a furtive fashion, began to unfasten the buttons of his waistcoat.

"Surely you're not going to disrobe here, my good man?" he said, in an unnecessarily distinct voice.

Mr. Pope, crimson with rage and confusion, turned a deaf ear. For some time he went on with his meal in silence, and then, conversing in a low voice with Carstairs, allowed such words as "wasters," "over-grown schoolboys," "boors," etc., to wander as far afield as the next table.

His countenance did not relax until the coffee and liqueur stage was reached. He lit a large cigar and, in a moment of forgetfulness, pushed a little farther from the table and leaned back in his chair. Contact was made, as the electricians say, and a strong current of obstinacy passed from Mr. Pope and rooted the feet of the man at the next table to the floor. Carstairs, at first amused, became apprehensive.

"Don't make a scene," he whispered. "You'll attract attention in a moment."

"*I'm* not doing anything," rejoined Pope, in a hot whisper. "Let him move back to his own territory."

He thrust his back heavily into his chair, determined not to budge an inch. The same idea seemed to possess his adversary, then better feelings prevailed, and with a quiet but sudden movement he hitched his chair forward at least a foot.

Mr. Pope, by a frantic movement of his arms, retained his balance, but a loud snapping noise indicated disaster. He turned to see the top of his chair and half the back dangling to the floor. His waiter came hastily to the scene of disaster and the manager made a leisurely progress up the room.

"Another chair, please," said Carstairs quietly.

A fresh chair was fetched, and the manager, expressing polite regrets for the shortcomings of the old one, withdrew to his lair to find fault with the waiter. The cause of the mischief, who had taken a languid interest in the proceedings over his right shoulder, lit a fresh cigarette and exchanged glances with Carstairs.

"Worst of these genuine twentieth-century Chippendale chairs," he remarked casually. "They won't stand a strain."

"They were not made for twentieth-century manners," rejoined Carstairs equably.

The young man flushed. "Do you mean it was my fault?" he inquired.

"You know it was," said Carstairs.

"Perhaps you're right," said the other, shaking his head. "But"—he nodded in the direction of Pope, and lowered his voice to a penetrating whisper—"he's got such an aggressive back. Besides, I didn't think the chair would break; I merely thought that he would come over backwards."

Mr. Pope, with a smothered exclamation, turned and regarded him fixedly.

"However, all's well that ends well," pursued the young man. "You'll allow me to settle for the damage."

"No," said Carstairs.

"I shan't feel comfortable unless I do," urged the other.

"I don't see any reason why you should be allowed to feel comfortable," said Carstairs. "You have done your best to make my friend feel uncomfortable."

"He's all right," said the young man, nodding comfortably at the glowering Pope. "He's a sportsman."

He turned his chair a little with the air of one

disposed for conversation, and, striking a match for his cigarette, applied it first to the end of Pope's cigar. The owner, paralyzed at his impudence, endured the attention in silence, while a faint chuckle from Carstairs cleared the atmosphere. Mr. Pope had finished his second cigar and the restaurant was nearly empty by the time they arose from the table and, walking down the room, divided the manager's bow between them.

"Bright youngster," said Carstairs, after their newly made acquaintance had departed.

Pope assented, but without much enthusiasm. "You gave him your address," he said accusingly.

"I like him," was the reply.

"And he is one of the sort that is sure to turn up," added Pope.

His remark was justified by the arrival of Mr. Jack Knight at Carstairs' flat three nights later. Being in the neighbourhood, he said, he thought he would just look in and see how Pope was progressing in the furniture-moving line. When he left, at midnight, both men saw him to the lift.

Within a fortnight he was on the footing of an old and valued friend, and full of advice beyond his years as to the best and most satisfactory mode of disposing of a large income. The endowment of an orphan asylum, coupled with visits to Monte

Carlo, would, he thought, satisfy all shades of opinion.

"Or you might get married," he said thoughtfully. "There are plenty of women who could get through your income and ask for more."

"Meantime," said Carstairs, "while you are pricing sites for the asylum, and Pope is looking up the trains to Monte Carlo, I am going to look about for a place in the country."

"Of course," said Knight suddenly. "Good heavens! Why didn't I think of it before? It's the very thing; it fits in exactly. I've been wondering why Fate threw you into my lap in such an informal manner. Now I know."

"He is rambling," said Pope.

"We are all going to ramble," retorted Knight. "That is, so far as one can ramble in a motor-car. To-morrow I am going to take you in a car—Carstairs'—to see the place. A beautiful Elizabethan house in Hampshire that is just made for you."

"What's that got to do with your lap?" inquired Carstairs.

"Small park, lot of land, and a lake; a little gem of a lake," pursued the young man. "It's a little bit of Paradise that has fallen into Hampshire and is waiting for you to pick up."

"The place I'm going to look at is in Surrey,"

said Carstairs. "I'm already corresponding about it."

"Surrey? Surrey's no good," said Knight quickly. "It's overrun. You come to Hampshire, there's a good chap."

"Afterwards, perhaps, if the place in Surrey is no good," said Carstairs.

"But it might be," said the other, "and in that case you wouldn't want the Hampshire one."

Carstairs acquiesced.

"There's something behind it," growled Pope. "Something to do with his precious lap. He is quite agitated."

"You're right, Pope," said Carstairs, regarding the young man closely. "If it were anybody else I should say he was blushing."

"It's as near as he will ever get to it," said Pope.

"I have got nothing to blush about," declared Knight firmly. "There's nothing wrong about being engaged, is there?"

"Engaged!" said his listeners together, and, "I hope she's worthy of you," added Pope.

"I fail to see the connection between your engagement and my choice of a house," said Carstairs.

"Lack of imagination," said Knight briefly. "She

lives down there. If you take that delightful Elizabethan mansion I can come and stay with you. As it is, whenever I want to see her I have to hang about fishing in the beastly little river there. Last four times I caught three puny fish and saw her once—with her guardian."

Carstairs looked at him helplessly for a few seconds, and then turned his gaze on Pope.

"No sense of proportion," he said, at last, "or else morally deficient."

"Both," said Pope, in a deep voice.

"The house is probably a draughty ruin," pursued Carstairs, "the so-called lake a duck-pond covered with green slime. He ought to have been a house agent."

"Well, I'm going down there to-morrow, anyway," said Knight. "If you won't drive me down, I suppose I must go by train—third class."

"Why do you have to go fishing?" inquired Carstairs.

Mr. Knight sighed. "The engagement is not official," he said, after a pause. "Lady Penrose, her guardian, misunderstands me."

"But surely——" began Carstairs.

"Don't make obvious jokes," said Knight wearily. "This is serious. I suppose an old bachelor doesn't understand; but he might try and learn."

"What has the guardian got against you?" asked Carstairs.

"Poverty," said Mr. Knight gloomily. "I am an undesirable. Four hundred a year and a distinguished appearance are my sole assets."

"When I was your age——" began Carstairs.

"Oh, my Aunt!" interrupted Mr. Knight, in despairing accents. "My dear Carstairs, I have got three uncles, three stolid, unimaginative uncles, and whenever I go to see them to try and touch them for a little bit they always begin that way. It's their one opening. Try and say something more agreeable. Tell me the time the car will be ready."

"I'm not going to take that house, mind," said Carstairs.

"Course not," said Knight, with a delighted grin. "But you can look at it. There's no harm in looking, as the lady said when her husband asked her not to go to the bargain sale. You're a brick, Carstairs. So's Pope," he added, after a moment's reflection. "Will half-past ten be too early for you?"

"That'll do," said Carstairs. "Is the chauffeur to wear a white favour?"

"He can wear a wreath of roses if he likes," said Knight. "I don't mind. I'm so pleased at being able to be of service to you, Carstairs, that I'd put

up with anything. By the way, do you mind if I bring a friend with me? Chap named Peplow—great friend of mine. He's got interests down there, too."

"Interests?" repeated Carstairs, in a dazed voice.

Mr. Knight nodded. "She's a very nice girl," he said generously. "Freddie used to come down fishing with me, and the two girls are great friends. He had met her before in town, too."

"Do you think I'm running a matrimonial agency?" demanded Carstairs.

"Not at all," said Knight, raising his eyebrows. "I'm merely asking you for a lift, that's all. I'll tell Peplow he must go by train."

"Bring him, by all means," said Carstairs. "But, mind, I wash my hands of it. I am merely going to look at a house."

"Awfully good of you," said the other. "And, if you remember, that's just what I wanted you to go down there for. Well, good-by. If I'm to be up early in the morning I must be off."

He took a cigarette from the box and departed, humming the latest air from the latest musical comedy. Carstairs, to avoid the censorious gaze of Pope, got up and helped himself to a whisky and soda.

The morning was misty, with a glorious sun over-

head, as, punctual to the minute, the car drew up and Mr. Knight descended the steps from his front door, accompanied by a young man of somewhat chubby appearance, whom he introduced as Mr. Peplow. To Mr. Pope's whispered inquiry, "Where are the others?" he turned a deaf ear.

"Awf'lly good of you," said Mr. Peplow, climbing into the car as his friend got up in front. "I'm so fond of fishing."

"Are your rods down there?" inquired Carstairs, as the car moved off.

"Jack," said Mr. Peplow, leaning forward, "we've forgotten the rods."

"Never mind," said Mr. Knight.

"But——" said Mr. Peplow.

Knight twisted round in his seat. "It's all right," he said calmly. "They know all about it. Carstairs wormed it out of me last night."

Mr. Peplow sat back in his seat and blushed, and, smoothing a small fair moustache, glanced sideways at his astonished host. A smothered guffaw from Mr. Pope did not add to his comfort.

"Awf'lly good of you," he murmured mechanically.

"Just the day for a run," said Knight, turning round in his seat again as they left the dwindling

suburbs and began to scent the open country. "You ought to be awfully obliged to me, Carstairs."

"I am," was the reply.

"What is the programme?" inquired Knight. "There's an awfully decent inn in the village, and I suggest we should lunch there, and then go on to the house afterwards."

"That'll do," said Carstairs. "And perhaps we shall be able to see the house from the inn. That will save trouble."

"I don't mind trouble," said Knight, "especially if I can pick my own. Do you mind if I drive a little way?"

He changed seats, and Mr. Pope, with a smothered exclamation, held on to the side of the car. He leaned across Mr. Peplow to shout to Carstairs, but the wind blew the words down his throat. He huddled back into his seat, and prepared for the worst.

"Fast?" said Mr. Knight, as he slowed down for a village. "You don't call that fast, do you? Wait till I get a bit of straight road."

"He never has an accident," said Mr. Peplow proudly, "but he's had the most marvellous squeaks. Do you remember that brick-cart, Jack?"

Mr. Knight turned his head to smile, and Mr. Pope's voice rose in protest.

"We'll keep her down to twenty-five or thirty, please," said Carstairs, leaning forward, "for the sake of the brick-carts."

Mr. Knight sighed, and with a couple of fingers on the wheel endeavoured, but in vain, to carry on a conversation with Mr. Pope.

"We're nearly there, now," he said presently. "Keep your eyes open for the scenery."

They passed slowly through a winding village street, whose half-timbered houses had drowsed through the centuries. The bell of the general shop clanged, and a bent back disappeared inside the doorway of the Red Lion. The rest of the place slept.

"Restful!" said Mr. Knight, almost smacking his lips. "Here's our show."

He drew up in front of a sedate old inn a hundred yards beyond the village, and, yielding the wheel to the chauffeur, led the way inside and, nodding to the landlord, passed upstairs.

"Now for a fire and a meal," he said as he ushered them into a comfortable room. "Here's the fire, and the food will be on the table at one. Observe how beautifully Pope's legs frame the glowing coals."

CHAPTER III

THE meal at the White Hart was so good that Carstairs had a shrewd suspicion that it had been ordered beforehand by the enterprising Knight. Mr. Pope rose from the table with a sigh, and, throwing the stub of his cigar into the grate, drew an arm-chair on to the hearth-rug and surveyed his friends with misty eyes. Then, to Knight's indignation, he drew a large silk handkerchief from his pocket and, placing it over his face, composed himself to slumber.

"Is he ill?" inquired Knight. "I don't like his breathing. There's a croupy sound about it that would make me uneasy if I were his mother!"

The lips below the handkerchief parted, and then, apparently thinking better of it, shut again with a snap.

"Give him half an hour," said Carstairs.

"I'd give him five years if I could," said Knight fervently, "but, unfortunately, time won't wait. It's twenty past two now, and Hawker will be at the house at half-past."

"Hawker!" repeated Carstairs.

"The agent," explained Mr. Knight. "I didn't want you to have to come down twice over this affair, so I wired to him to meet you."

"Jack thinks of everything," said Mr. Peplow, turning to Carstairs.

"Did he think of your engagement?" said Pope, sitting up suddenly and turning to Mr. Peplow. "I mean, did he contrive it to suit his own ends in any way?"

"Certainly not," said Peplow, blushing. "It's—it's a case of mutual esteem. Besides, we are not engaged. We may be in time. It's only a hope with me at present. It's——"

"Don't tie yourself in knots, Freddie," said Knight kindly. "He's not your father; and there'll be plenty of other people to explain to. Save yourself up for them. All this is sour grapes to Pope. The only time a girl ever smiled at him was when he slipped on a banana skin. Are we all ready, Carstairs?"

A little over five minutes in the car brought them to the lodge gates, where a man in a blue baize apron, touching his cap as they turned in, followed them up the drive on foot. The road was a winding one, and when the house suddenly burst into view Carstairs was unable to repress an exclamation.

"Ripping, isn't it?" said the gratified Knight. "Don't let him look so pleased, Pope; Hawker is a hard nut to crack."

Mr. Hawker, a wiry figure in a bowler hat and mustard-coloured gaiters, came forward to meet them as the car stopped. A pleasant-faced man, but with a glint in his eye that put all Mr. Pope's faculties on the alert.

"Good job Carstairs has got you to look after him," murmured Knight in his ear as they dismounted.

Mr. Pope grinned, and endeavoured, but in vain, to throw off the arm linked in his. He even went so far as to call the owner a serpent, but Mr. Knight, who was at the moment introducing Mr. Carstairs, paid no heed.

It was a beautiful house, and Carstairs, to his secretary's horror, promptly said so. In these circumstances there was nothing for Mr. Pope to do but to call attention to the time-worn brickwork. He also pointed out that one of the gables was a little bit out of plumb.

"Very nice to look at, of course," he said, shaking his head, as they passed slowly along the terrace. "I remember once being much impressed by the ruins of an old castle in Scotland."

"Ah, if you want ruins," said Mr. Hawker, "I'm

afraid you will be disappointed here. The house is in a splendid state of preservation."

"Any ghosts?" inquired Pope.

Mr. Hawker hesitated; some people like ghosts, others have an insurmountable objection to them.

"It looks too comfortable for a ghost," he said with a laugh. "Do you believe in them?"

"Certainly not," said Pope disdainfully.

"There is no ghost here," said Hawker promptly. "Shall we go inside now, while the light is good?"

He led the way in, and left the old, oak-panelled hall, with its huge, open fireplace, to speak for itself. A wood fire crackled and blazed on the hearth.

"I thought it would look comfortable," said Mr. Hawker.

Mr. Pope, with his back to the blaze, nodded benignly. Then he intercepted a faint grin passing from Mr. Knight to Mr. Peplow.

"You thought so too, Knight?" he said loudly.

"I *think* so," corrected the young man in a surprised voice. "But, my dear Pope, think of this hall furnished! Old chests, old chairs—not too old to be comfortable — Persian rugs, drinks, cigars——"

"Draughts," interposed Mr. Pope.

"Fresh air," said Knight. "Come along, there's

a lot to see. And after the house there is the glass, and the stables, *and* the lake."

They wandered through the house, Mr. Knight hastily furnishing each room in a few well-chosen words as they inspected it. A suite of three rooms with a magnificent view he allotted to Mr. Pope. He laid stress on the fact that the principal one contained a fireplace big enough to roast an ox.

"It's a nice house," said Carstairs to him, as they all trooped downstairs again. "Yes, all right; I have admired the staircase once—and if you will give me your word of honour never to visit me or worry me with your matrimonial projects I might think of taking it."

"I'll promise never to come unless I am asked," said the young man stiffly.

"I'm afraid that's no good," said Carstairs, smiling. "You must promise not to come when you *are* asked."

Mr. Knight's face relaxed. "You're a good sort, Carstairs," he said blithely. "Bit too fond of rotting; but we can't all be perfect. Pope must have got a soft spot in his heart for me too. He said the other day that he wished he had been my father."

The air struck chill and the light was fading as they got outside. It was damp underfoot, and the

much-vaunted lake looked drear and cold. Effects on the water, pointed out by Messrs. Hawker and Knight, only elicited a shiver from Mr. Pope.

"Most depressing," he declared. "Let's get back and have some tea. We shall be frozen getting back to town."

He turned and led the way to the car, while the lodge-keeper, who had been hovering near the party, touched his cap to Carstairs and asked permission to favour him with a few biographical details concerning the best man he ever knew. It was an inspiring theme, but the party waiting in the car began to murmur at the length of it. He turned away with a smile at last and moved off with a springy step.

"Want the job?" inquired Knight, as Carstairs took a seat beside him.

Carstairs nodded.

"What did you tell him?" inquired the other, as the car whirled down the drive.

"Told him 'Yes,' of course," said Carstairs. "Poor chap, he has been in a state of anxiety for nine months. He's been here seventeen years. What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing," said Knight. "It wasn't a laugh; it was a gratified smile at hearing you have decided to take the place."

"Subject to coming to terms, yes," said Carstairs. "But that is Pope's job. Pope *versus* Hawker. You were quite right, Knight; it's a beautiful place, and I'm glad I came to see it."

"Few men would admit themselves to have been in the wrong as freely as you do," said Knight gravely. "Freddie!"

"Halloa!" said Mr. Peplow.

"He's hooked!"

Mr. Peplow started, and then turned to Mr. Carstairs with a glance of protest at his friend's rudeness.

"That's all right," said Knight. "You needn't look like a little plaster saint. Remember what you said about him last night."

"I?" stammered the distressed Peplow. "I assure you, Mr. Carstairs——"

"He's always like that," said Knight calmly; "he lets me fight his battles for him, and then tries to pass by on the other side. Fortunately, my character is strong enough for both. Here we are, and now for a cup of Pope-reviving tea. Hot and strong, with two lumps of sugar."

Mr. Pope subsided into his easy-chair with a sigh of relief and extended his hands to the blaze. Tea appeared on the table, but he refused to move, and

taking cup after cup in his cosy corner gradually thawed into a heavy geniality. He even joined in the chorus of praise of the house, comparing it favourably with others of three inches by two that he had seen in advertisements. In reply to a challenge of Knight's he declared himself a match for Hawker any day.

"So long as you fix it up I don't mind who wins," said Knight. "Carstairs has got plenty of money. Have you finished, Freddie?" he inquired, with a significant glance; "because if so you had better come down and see the landlord about that dog you were talking about."

Mr. Peplow, exhibiting more confusion than the occasion seemed to warrant, arose, and with a glance at Carstairs, followed his friend out of the room. Mr. Pope, declining another cup of tea, lit a cigarette and smoked on in silence.

"Nice boys," said Carstairs, breaking a long silence.

Pope grunted. "Might be worse," he said at last. "Pity Knight couldn't have had the advantage of a training at the bank. If he had gone in, say at eighteen, under me, he would have been a different man altogether."

Carstairs agreed, and, drawing his chair up, sat gazing at the fire. Pope finished his cigarette, and,

throwing the stub into the grate, closed his eyes and fell into a light doze.

He awoke after some time, and, rubbing his eyes, sat up blinking at his friend. Then he looked at the clock.

"Good gracious!" he said, with a start. "It's time we were off. Where are those boys?"

Carstairs shook his head. "Still discussing the dog, I suppose," he said.

"I'll go and hurry them up," said Pope.

He went heavily downstairs, to reappear in five minutes' time with the landlord.

"They didn't say anything to me about a dog," said the latter. "They went out about half an hour ago, and they said if anybody asked for them they had gone out to look at the moon."

"Moon!" repeated Mr. Pope sharply. "But there is no moon."

"Just what I told 'em," said the landlord. "And Mr. Knight said, 'No, he knew that, and they were going out to see what had become of it.' "

Carstairs coughed and looked at Pope. "It would serve 'em right——" he began slowly.

"Eh?" said Pope.

Their eyes met, and the hard lines in Pope's face melted into a huge grin.

"Let me have my car as soon as possible," said

Carstairs, turning to the landlord; "and when those two gentlemen come back tell them we couldn't wait."

"Tell 'em we have 'shot the moon,'" added Pope, with a noisy chuckle. "Hurry up!"

He clapped Carstairs on the shoulder as the landlord withdrew, and both gentlemen, in a state of glee somewhat unsuited to their years, proceeded to array themselves for the journey. Pope held his friend's coat for him and placed it almost tenderly about his shoulders. Mr. Carstairs, after Pope had wound a huge muffler about his throat, thoughtfully pulled up his coat-collar for him.

"I hope the landlord won't forget that bit about 'shooting the moon,'" said Pope, as they almost danced downstairs. "I should like to see Knight's face; but you can't have everything."

They stopped in front of the cosy bar, and at Pope's suggestion ordered a couple of glasses of cherry brandy to keep out the cold.

"Car ready?" he inquired, as the landlord came in from the back.

"Can't find the chauffeur, sir," said the landlord. "He's nowhere on the premises, but I've sent the ostler up the street to look for him."

Mr. Pope, with his glass midway to his mouth, turned pale and put it down on the counter again,

while the landlord turned to renew the search—apparently in the coal-shed. Mr. Carstairs emptied his glass, and both gentlemen, with lagging steps, ascended the stairs again.

"Youth must be served," quoted Carstairs, as he proceeded to unwrap himself.

"I wish I had the serving of him," grunted the other. "Of all the young jackanapes——"

He turned away as he saw Carstairs' lips twitch, and after a hopeless attempt to maintain his dignity began to laugh too. Restored to good-humour, he poked the fire, and, putting his feet on the fender, sat down to wait.

Half an hour later a murmur of voices below announced the return of the truants. The landlord's voice was heard above the others, then a smothered laugh, apparently from Mr. Knight, and a startled "H'sh!" which the reddening Pope rightly attributed to Mr. Peplow.

"Landlord's given them your message," said Carstairs.

"Hope we haven't kept you waiting?" said Knight, politely, as he entered the room, followed by a shadowy Peplow.

"We have been waiting an hour and a half," said Carstairs.

"Sorry," said Knight. "Didn't seem more than five minutes to us, did it, Freddie?"

"I—I thought we had been about a quarter of an hour," said Mr. Peplow, "or perhaps twenty minutes."

Mr. Knight looked from Carstairs to Pope and from Pope to Carstairs.

"Sorry," he said again, with dignity, "but you know our object in coming down here, Carstairs, and, after having missed the afternoon looking after your business, we thought we might take ten minutes for our own."

Carstairs looked helplessly at Pope. "My business?" he said at last.

"Helping you to choose a house," explained Knight.

"And what did you take Biggs away with you for?" demanded Carstairs.

"Out of deference to your prejudices," said Knight promptly. "Freddie thought——"

"I didn't," interrupted Mr. Peplow hastily.

"Freddie thought," repeated Mr. Knight firmly, "that you and Pope, being mid-Victorians, would have old-fashioned notions about that sort of thing, so we took Biggs to chaperon us, and, in justice to him, I must say that we told him to come with us

to take something back to you. He has just asked me what it was."

"What was it?" inquired Carstairs, staring.

"A report of our immaculate behaviour," said Knight. "Lady Penrose's maid was with them, and he kept her company in her duties."

"Don't listen to him," said Pope, rising and picking up his overcoat.

"Besides, it was a precautionary measure," added Knight.

Pope stopped with one arm in a sleeve and stared at him.

"Neither of you being able to drive," explained Knight, with an abominable grin.

CHAPTER IV

MR. HAWKER, in a moment of frankness caused by despondency, admitted that he had met his match in Mr. Pope; after which the negotiations for the tenancy of Berstead Place progressed with great smoothness. The lawyers on both sides raised various points, but nothing that consultations and letters could not adjust to the satisfaction of all concerned. In the exercise of his duties Pope paid frequent visits to Carstairs' lawyers, a remark of the junion partner, a somewhat excitable person, to the effect that it was a pity Pope had not been brought up to the law, giving him great satisfaction until, in an ill moment for his peace of mind, he repeated it to the evil-minded Knight.

The lease was signed at last, and the house put into the hands of a well-known firm of builders, decorations proceeding with the slowness characteristic of good work and the ideals of the English workman.

"Trying to hurry them is no good," announced

Mr. Pope, coming out of the house with a somewhat flushed face, on a fine afternoon in February, "and sarcasm is simply thrown away on them. One little rat of a painter actually asked me whether I had ever been on the music-halls. Me!"

"I know the man you mean," said Carstairs. "I stood looking at him the other day for a quarter of an hour and he never moved a muscle. However, they will finish some time, in spite of their efforts. Suppose we walk back and meet the car."

It was damp underfoot, but the air was soft and warm, and birds of an optimistic turn of mind were already beginning to sing the praises of spring. The two friends tramped on pleasantly until they reached the village, and, proceeding along the High Street, gazed with some curiosity at a little crowd at the other end of it.

"Looks like our car," said Pope, quickening his pace.

It was their car, and their chauffeur with a piece of borrowed string was taking painstaking measurements of the distance of his wheels from the footpath. His job finished, he proceeded quite unasked to perform the same office for a damaged governess-car that stood near by on one wheel. A neatly shaved young groom, standing at his horse's head, watched him with calm disdain.

"What is the matter?" inquired Carstairs, stepping forward.

"Young lad and a young horse, sir," said Biggs, respectfully, but loudly. "Came right across the road into my off mudguard. Look at it!"

Carstairs glanced at the crumpled metal, and then looked at the shattered wheel of the trap.

"Anybody hurt?" he inquired.

Mr. Biggs stood reflecting. "I don't think so," he observed calmly. "It wasn't his fault if they weren't; he did his best. Come right across the road; I s'pose he pulled the wrong rein."

Carstairs looked around inquiringly. A handsome, smartly dressed woman of about thirty-five stood on the footpath with a pretty girl. From a certain air of detached interest they manifested in the proceedings he came to the conclusion that the trap belonged to them.

"I hope you are not hurt!" he said, raising his cap.

"Fortunately—no," was the reply.

"Or shaken?"

A little colour appeared in the lady's cheek. "One can hardly be shot out of a cart without," she said tartly.

Few men can gaze on beauty in distress unmoved.

"You must have been driving very carelessly, Biggs!" exclaimed Carstairs.

"Yessir," said Biggs respectfully.

"You might have killed these ladies."

Biggs twisted his features into an expression of concern. "Yessir," he said again. "I was only a foot from the kerb. I couldn't give 'em much more room."

"He put his hand up," said an old man standing by. "I see him do it. You ought to ha' stopped."

"You ought to be in bed," said Biggs, in a low voice, as he edged up to him. "You oughtn't to be out with eyes like them. It ain't safe."

"I'm afraid we are to blame," said Carstairs, "but I am delighted to see that nobody has been injured. May I give you my address?"

He took out his case and, extracting a card, handed it to the owner of the trap. The girl leaned forward to read it, and then, looking up at Carstairs, favoured him with a dazzling smile. Her companion, placing the card in her purse, bowed and turned away.

"And if you would permit me to send you home," said Carstairs, "my car is at your disposal. Please take it."

"He is really a good driver," said Pope, joining in the conversation. "You would be quite safe."

"Thanks very much, but we are quite able to walk," said the lady.

"I don't know," said the girl gravely, with another glance at Carstairs. "I'd sooner ride, Isabel, if you don't mind. I feel just a wee bit tottery."

Her companion hesitated. Carstairs held the door open, and, after another moment's hesitation, she stepped in and seated herself.

"Very kind of you," she said, smiling. "It isn't far; you won't have to wait long."

Mr. Biggs, who was having a heart-to-heart talk with the groom, tore himself away with visible reluctance.

"Why don't you hold him properly?" he said, alluding to the horse. "He's wiped his nose once on your sleeve already."

The wheelwright came up after the car had gone and took the trap away, and the horse and groom, a dejected couple, started on the walk home. Mr. Biggs, who met them on his return journey, was still smiling broadly when he rejoined his employer.

"I couldn't say much before a lady, sir," he said, as Carstairs got into the car, "but it was their fault; the horse danced about all over the road. I've drove a car for six years now and never touched anything yet. Other things have touched me sometimes—and wished they hadn't."

Knight, who looked in at the flat late that evening, espoused the cause of Biggs. "Far too nervous and careful to run into anything," he said scornfully. "My fingers simply itch to take the wheel away from him sometimes."

"Let 'em itch," grunted Pope.

"He'll draw a bath-chair before he has finished," said the young man, "with a dear friend of mine in it. By the way, who were the ladies? What was the young one like?"

"Attractive," replied Pope.

Knight looked interested. "Very attractive?" he asked.

Pope started and hid a grin. "No," he replied.

"What was the old lady like?" inquired Knight, looking disappointed.

"There was no old lady there," retorted Carstairs sharply. "Really, Knight——"

Mr. Knight whistled. "Sorry," he said slowly, "but there's no disgrace in being old. I shall be old myself some day. Old age is beautiful. Isn't it, Pope? Well, what was she like, anyway? Attractive?"

Carstairs nodded. "A well-bred, handsome woman, a little over thirty, I should think," he replied.

Knight's eyes sparkled. "And rather a sour expression?" he inquired.

"Certainly not," said Carstairs and Pope together.

"If it is the one I am thinking of, I have seen it often enough," said Knight. "But what was the girl really like, Carstairs?"

"Oh, nice bright girl," said Carstairs. "Friendly smile, tallish. She called her friend Isabel."

"There you are," said Knight, jumping up. "My suspicions are confirmed. Isabel is Lady Penrose's name, and you begin an acquaintance I was looking forward to with great hopes by wrecking her cart. I wonder who the girl was?"

"Does it really matter?" inquired Carstairs, with a yawn.

"No," said Knight. "I was wondering whether it was Miss Seacombe, that is all, but your description is far too lukewarm to apply to her. However, we shall know when you call to inquire."

"Call to inquire?" repeated Carstairs. "I am not going to call. Why, I only know the lady's name by accident."

"Of course you will call," said Knight. "You knock a couple of ladies out of their trap with your beastly road-hog car, and then you think the affair is finished. You must display a little interest in the welfare of your victims. Ask Pope; he knows."

Mr. Pope, removing his cigar, pursed up his lips and frowned thoughtfully. "Wait till we get their

bill for damages," he said at last, with a side glance at Carstairs. "Then, if it is too heavy, Carstairs can call and protest and inquire after her health at the same time."

"Funny," retorted Knight, "but that gives me an idea. I don't suppose it's at all likely Lady Penrose will make any claim. Carstairs can call on her if she doesn't and insist upon it. How will that do?"

"Anything to get rid of you," said Carstairs, with a glance at the clock.

"You will call?"

"Perhaps."

"I'll come with you next time you run down," said Knight, with an air of resignation. "Things are sure to go wrong if I'm not there; and you don't seem to realise how important this is. But don't forget one thing. Don't let Lady Penrose know that we are acquainted. Let it come as a little surprise to her, when it is too late."

"Any further instructions?" inquired Carstairs.

"I'll let you know on the way down," was the reply. "Providence seems to be fighting on my behalf, and I want to give it all the assistance I can. I shall give Biggs half-a-crown; he deserves it."

Biggs received the money next day, and, having placed it carefully in a leather purse before stowing

it away in his pocket, made it quite clear to his benefactor that he had not earned it. He preferred to regard it as some slight consolation for a base attempt to injure an untarnished reputation.

No word having come from Lady Penrose, they went down to Berstead a week later, the inability of Carstairs to make up his mind as to the propriety of calling causing great concern to Knight on the way.

"If it had been a cottager you would have been round next evening," he said severely. "Just because the unfortunate victim happens to be a lady you are treating her with studied neglect. She may have died from shock for all you know—expecting you up to the end."

"I thought I was to see her about the damage," observed Carstairs.

"Combine business with pleasure," said Knight, "but don't ask after the cart first, mind. While you are gone Pope and I will hustle the workmen for you. She won't bite you; as a matter of fact, she is rather faddy about food."

Carstairs dropped them at the house, and after remarking that he would be back in ten minutes' time, and adjuring Pope not to let Knight annoy the workmen, gave Biggs his directions and drove away.

Pope, staring after the receding car, turned to confront his smiling companion.

"He is doing this for you," he said importantly. "Carstairs is a very shy man, a remarkably shy man where women are concerned."

"It is time he was cured, then," said the other serenely. "A man has no business to be shy. I never was. Women don't like shy men; they are so difficult to encourage. Let's go inside and see how things are progressing."

Pope followed him in, and for some time they wandered through the empty rooms. Many of them were finished, but in some the workmen still lingered.

"Carstairs is taking a good ten minutes," said Knight, as they gained the hall again. "Got a cigarette about you, Pope? I left mine in my coat."

"So did I," said Pope. "Let's stroll as far as the lodge and meet him. I feel chilly standing about."

They reached the lodge and stood waiting, and, there being no sign of the car, walked slowly back again to the house and sat on the stairs. A gentle murmur sounded outside.

"Rain," said Knight.

He got up and walked about the house again. The men were putting their tools together, and, drifting downstairs, turned their coat-collars up at

the door and departed in little groups. A foreman, waiting to lock up, coughed restlessly.

"I'll take the key," said Pope. "We'll leave it at the lodge."

He put it in his pocket and, walking to the door, stood gazing at the rain, which was now falling steadily.

"They must have had a breakdown," he said at last, crossly. "Pity we didn't ask them to give us some tea at the lodge."

"Let's make a run for it," suggested the other.

Pope shook his head. "Rheumatism," he said tersely. "We should get wet through." He put his hands in his pockets and paced to and fro. Half an hour passed.

"Wonder what's happened?" said Knight. "I hope he's all right."

"I wish he'd come," snapped Pope. "This is what comes of listening to you."

He went back to the stairs again and sat shivering. Outside the rain was falling faster than ever, and darkness was coming on.

"I'm afraid you're right," he said, after a long silence. "Something must have happened to him. He'd never leave me here like this."

"Or me," asserted Knight. "Hark!"

He stepped to the door again, followed by Pope.

The sound of an approaching car was distinctly audible, and in a few seconds the head-lights swung round the corner. It drew up as Pope locked the door, and stood waiting with a rhythmically throbbing engine.

"What's the matter?" he inquired, as Biggs reached backwards and opened the door.

"Matter!" repeated Carstairs, in a surprised voice. "Nothing."

"What on earth have you been all this time for, then?" inquired Pope, dropping heavily into his seat.

"Have I been long?" said Carstairs. "It didn't seem like it."

"But you haven't been all this time at Lady Penrose's?" said Knight.

"Why not?" said Carstairs, with some warmth. "By the way, Knight, it was Miss Seacombe who was in the trap with her that day."

Mr. Knight, who was struggling into his coat, grunted. "Your rapturous description could only fit her," he remarked dryly. "Let me give you a hand with your coat, Pope."

Mr. Pope, accepting the proffered assistance, sank back into his seat again, and after peering vainly at Carstairs in the darkness, subsided into an aggrieved silence. He broke it at last with a remark about tea.

"Tea!" repeated Carstairs dreamily. "I've had some, thanks."

He pulled up his coat collar and, nestling comfortably in his corner, closed his eyes. Mr. Pope, suffering from a sudden fortunate impediment in his speech, allowed Knight to speak for him.

"It isn't tea he wants," said that gentleman sharply, "it's milk—a little of the milk of human kindness. There he sits—wrapped up in himself, and we can perish of cold and starvation for all he cares. Are you listening, Carstairs?"

"I forgot you," said Carstairs. "Stop at the first place you come to. Go on, Biggs."

"Forgot us!" repeated Knight, raising his voice as the car moved on. "That's his idea of an apology."

CHAPTER V

A STEADY trickle of thirsty carmen into the Red Lion during March heralded the arrival of Mr. Carstairs to Berstead Place. They brought on their vans old furniture, and other old furniture which represented the pouring of new wine into old bottles with the happiest results. Chairs which had long since given up their backs as hopeless held themselves erect again and invited the inspection of the amateur expert; chairs with three new legs footed it with the oldest.

"You can't tell them without taking them to pieces," said Knight to Pope one afternoon, "and even the oldest friend of the family couldn't do that. I shall be furnishing myself some day, and this experience has been very valuable to me. Your purchases will last longer than any of the others."

"Why?" inquired Pope, smiling.

"Because they're the youngest."

"They'll be old enough by the time you furnish," said Pope, with a malevolent grin. "I didn't tell you that I called with Carstairs yesterday to make

sure that Lady Penrose is still unhurt? That's his third visit."

Mr. Knight raised his eyebrows.

"Charming woman," said Pope reminiscently. "Delightful! But it was quite clear, from the way she talked about you, that you haven't the ghost of a chance."

"About me!" exclaimed Knight. "Why, you old blunderer, what did you mention my name for?"

"I didn't," said Pope placidly; "but she was talking to Carstairs about Miss Seacombe—charming girl, something so fresh and unspoilt about her. I got quite interested."

"Go on," urged Knight. "Never mind about your feelings."

"She was talking about her responsibility—Lady Penrose, I mean—and when she spoke of flippant ne'er-do-wells with no object in life we both thought that she must be referring to you. When she used the expression 'harmless and useless,' we felt quite certain. Pity she didn't mention you by name, because then we could have stood up for you."

"I don't mind the other terms," exclaimed Knight, "but 'harmless.' Well, perhaps, she'll know better in time. Harmless! I've never been called that before. If it had been Freddie Peplow, now——"

"She gets on very well with Carstairs," continued

Mr. Pope. "Wonder what will happen when she finds out that he knows you? Either she will drop him, I suppose, or——"

"Or?" prompted Mr. Knight.

"Or he will have to drop you."

"Nobody can drop me unless I want them to," said Knight cheerfully. "Think of the ingratitude of it! Why, Carstairs would never have known of the house if it hadn't been for me. He wouldn't have banged into her cart if it hadn't been for me. Are you sure she said 'harmless'? Sure it wasn't 'harmful'?"

He took occasion to remind Carstairs at their next meeting of all he had done for him, but, despite a habit of looking on the cheerful side of things, doubts began to assail him as to his friend's single-minded devotion to his interests. The man for whom he had done so much even advised him to go away for a year and find some hard and congenial work. Mr. Knight, after pointing out the discrepancy, requested him to descend to details. Carstairs, after long deliberation, suggested sheep-farming in Australia.

"I was waiting for it," said Knight, in resigned accents. "I knew it was coming. It is the one occupation that my intelligent friends always select for me. And they always harp on Australia. I suppose

we *can* sheep-farm in other places. Why Australia? And what do you think I know about sheep?"

Carstairs pondered. "Poultry-farming?" he suggested slowly.

"That's the second string," said Knight, with forced calm. "Not so popular as the other because it is done in England. I look like a poultry-farmer, don't I? How do you think the unfortunate hens would like it?"

"Perhaps you had better take to work by degrees," said Carstairs, smiling. "I can find you a job—for one afternoon. Are you doing anything on Friday?"

"Depends upon what the job is," said Knight.

"I have been trying to arrange with an aunt of mine to come and look after me at Berstead," said Carstairs. "She couldn't make up her mind for some time, and, now she has decided to come, she is coming rather sooner than I wanted her. She is coming up on Friday to spend a few days in London before going on to Berstead."

"What do you want me to do?" inquired Knight. "Head her off?"

"I want you to look after her for a few hours," said Carstairs. "She is due at Euston at three, and Pope and I had already fixed up to run down to the house. She is an old lady of seventy, and if we

meet her and hand her over to you we can go on. You could bring her here and look after her till we come back."

"Is she to be a fixture at Berstead?" asked Knight thoughtfully.

"That is the idea," said Carstairs.

"Very good idea, too," said Knight slowly. "You and Pope want somebody to look after you. I had five or six very important engagements for Friday afternoon, but I'll throw them over. I want to heap coals of fire on your head. How old do you say she is?"

"Seventy."

Mr. Knight looked thoughtful. "Hurry back as soon as you can," he exclaimed. "I don't want to overdo the coals of fire business. I suppose she won't be nervous in a taxi? I don't want her clinging to me, or anything of that sort."

His forebodings increased each day, and he was unusually quiet as he waited with Carstairs and Pope for the incoming train.

"She will probably want to rest when she gets to the flat," said Carstairs. "Be as gentle as you can with her. It's rather awkward my having to run off like this."

"Deucedly awkward," agreed Mr. Knight. "I wish now I'd asked Freddie to lend a hand."

The train drew into the station and the crowd moved up the platform. A fragile little old lady with white hair and bright blue eyes detached herself from the throng and came towards them. Carstairs, after an affectionate handshake, introduced his companions. Then, a little awkwardly, he explained the situation.

"It's very kind of him," said Mrs. Ginnell; "but I should have been all right. Now you hurry away. Mr. Knight and I will look after the luggage. I shall see you when you come back."

She raised her nose and sniffed gently as the porter and the taxi-driver hoisted up the luggage. "Smells good," she said, with a satisfied air.

Mr. Knight stared at her.

"London," she explained. "I haven't seen it for twenty-two years. Is it far to the flat?"

"About a couple of miles," said Knight.

Mrs. Ginnell sighed. "Ask him to drive slowly," she murmured.

"It's quite safe," said Knight reassuringly. "I picked him on purpose."

Mrs. Ginnell laughed. "I didn't mean that," she said. "I want to see a little of the place."

"Might drive round a bit if you like," said the other.

Mrs. Ginnell nodded, and sitting with clasped hands peered through the window at the life of the streets. Certain landmarks she recognised with little gasps of pleasure; others had disappeared to make way for new streets and palatial buildings. By the time they reached the flat the taximeter registered six-and-eightpence, and she spoke warmly to Knight of the courtesy of the modern taxi-driver as compared with the old-style cabman. She referred to an affair with one of the latter which had rankled for thirty-five years.

"Tea first?" said Knight, as he placed her in Carstairs' most comfortable chair. "And then perhaps you'd like to go to your room and rest for an hour or two."

"No, I am not in the least tired, thank you," said Mrs. Ginnell, as he rang for the tea. "Why, I've done nothing to-day yet. I've been sitting down all the time. I want you to tell me all about my nephew and the new house."

She poured out tea and listened, interposing with a dexterous question or two whenever the young man showed signs of flagging. It was evident that she was a woman of intelligence; intelligent enough, he hoped, to take a lively interest in the affairs of deserving young men. He had a strong idea that she was worth cultivating.

"I suppose you wouldn't care to do anything?" he remarked, as he threw away the end of his third cigarette. "If you are not too tired, how about a cinema?"

"I should love it!" said Mrs. Ginnell. "I have never seen a really good one. What time do you think my nephew will be back?"

"Eight at the earliest," was the reply. "But we needn't trouble about them; we must consider ourselves."

He lit another cigarette while Mrs. Ginnell was getting ready, and, noting with approval her change of costume, escorted her downstairs.

"I'd rather walk," she exclaimed, as he looked around for a taxi. "That is, unless you are tired?"

Mr. Knight gazed at her suspiciously, but, seeing nothing but gentle consideration for his comfort in the old blue eyes looking into his, turned and walked beside her.

"Why, it's like a theatre!" said Mrs. Ginnell, as they took their seats. "The one I used to go to was in an old mission-hall with a tin roof."

She settled herself comfortably in her stall and for two hours watched with youthful enthusiasm Wild West cowboys galloping over the countryside; men with seraphic faces bearing the burden of another's guilt! amateur motorists obsessed with

the idea of charging scaffoldings and bringing on their heads cascades of infuriated bricklayers.

"Most enjoyable," she murmured, as they emerged into the cool spring evening. "Oh, dear! I have the same feeling now that I used to have years ago; it always seems so unsatisfactory to come out from an entertainment in daytime, and meet other people coming out to spend the evening."

Mr. Knight turned and regarded her with amazement, not unmixed with admiration.

"Quarter to seven," he said, looking at his watch. "Suppose we eat our simple meal at a restaurant instead of going back to the flat?"

"It would be delightful for me," said Mrs. Ginnell doubtfully; "but it is not very amusing for you."

"Now," said Knight, with some sternness, "you're fishing! When I tell you that I would sooner take you to dinner than—than——"

"I see your difficulty," said the old lady.

"Than anybody else but one person in the world," concluded Mr. Knight triumphantly.

"Very nice, if not exactly truthful," commented Mrs. Ginnell; "but I suppose truth is not nice as a rule. Very well, we will go to dinner, and you can tell me about the girl whose place I am usurping."

"Where shall we go?" said Knight, considering.

"The Pagoda is not bad, but they have a band there."

Mrs. Ginnell's eyes sparkled. "Lovely!" she exclaimed. "When one doesn't want to talk one can listen to the music; when one does—well, I'd like to see the band that would stop me."

It was a good dinner, and she ate it with appreciation. The band was discreet as well as tuneful, and the waiter like a ministering angel in a dress-suit.

"Fancy! I haven't done this for over twenty years," she said. "I'm so glad I came up in time to have a day or two in London first. It has been a most delightful day."

"Has been?" breathed Mr. Knight.

Mrs. Ginnell looked at him.

"Let's go on somewhere," said the tempter.

Mrs. Ginnell's better nature strove within her. "My nephew won't know what has become of us," she murmured. "Perhaps we had better go home."

"I'll 'phone to the people at the flat," said Knight. "What do you say? A theatre or a music-hall?"

"Music-hall," said Mrs. Ginnell promptly. "I've never been to one."

"I shall feel like a parent taking his child to its first pantomime," said Knight. "Are you ready?"

* * * * * * *

Messrs. Carstairs and Pope, who had been hurrying home at a pace utterly inconsistent with the safety of the public, arrived there just after the message was received, and over a comfortable meal shook their heads at the irresponsibility of youth.

"Probably lay her up for a fortnight," said Pope solemnly. "She's a delicate-looking little woman. I wonder what his game is?"

They sat and smoked until half-past eleven. At twelve o'clock Mrs. Ginnell's nephew began to be uneasy; at a quarter to one, just as he was preparing to organise the reluctant Pope into a search-party, the door opened and the truants entered. Carstairs, rising hastily, pushed a chair towards his aunt and offered to help her towards it.

"We've had a lovely time," said Mrs. Ginnell.

"Ripping," said Mr. Knight.

"What makes you so late?" inquired Carstairs.

"Late!" repeated Knight. "H'm! I suppose we are rather. We had a bit of supper after the show and that delayed us a bit."

He took a cigarette from the table and sat by as a sort of chorus while Mrs. Ginnell expatiated on the joys of the evening. The narration took her some time, but she retired to her room at last, and the door had scarcely closed behind her before Mr. Knight was sternly called upon for an explanation.

"At present," said Carstairs, "she is kept up by excitement."

"When that passes away——" said Pope, shaking his head.

"To-morrow," said Carstairs, with conviction, "she'll be a wreck."

"Beef-tea—arrowroot," explained Pope vaguely, "medicine—nurse."

"It's a wise nephew that knows its own aunt," said Knight. "Don't you worry about arrowroot for her; devilled kidneys are more in her line. She's a sportsman, and we understand each other thoroughly. Henceforth, Carstairs, we are rivals; I have adopted her as my aunt."

"Does she know it?" inquired Pope.

"Mutual arrangement, highly satisfactory to both parties," replied Knight, with a yawn. "Having the gift of perpetual youth she understands the motives and ideals of the young. She understands *me*. Or, what is better still, she thinks she does. By the way, you had better get off to bed, Carstairs. Mrs. Ginnell is going to ask you to take her to Hampton Court to-morrow, and she proposes to start at ten —so as to have a long day. Sorry I can't stop any longer, but I'm about done up. Good night."

CHAPTER VI

IT was a fine afternoon in late spring. A lark was singing in the sky; and the air was so soft, with such a feeling of life and movement in it, that Mr. Carstairs' butler, forgetting his high office, also lifted up his voice in song as he made his way across the fields. His song ceased suddenly as he turned a corner of the hedge and came upon a girl looking at him over her right shoulder.

"Afternoon, Miss Mudge," he said, with a slight cough.

Miss Mudge waited for him to overtake her.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Markham," she said brightly. "I'm afraid I've disturbed you. I had no idea you were a singer."

"Not much of a singer," said Markham modestly.

"There's all kinds," said Miss Mudge indulgently. "And so long as it doesn't hurt anybody, and they like to hear themselves sing, there's no harm done."

"Ah, you have got a happy nature," said the butler, returning good for evil. "How well you are

looking. I can't think what you do to look so fresh."

"Do!" said Miss Mudge, turning on him sharply. "Nothing! It's natural."

"Of course," said the other hastily; "I didn't mean that. I was just thinking there's many a lady would give anything to have your complexion; they'd sell their souls for it."

"I dare say," retorted Miss Mudge; "but they wouldn't get it for that. They'd get it cheap if they did, some of 'em. I say, do you think there's anything between my lady and Mr. Carstairs?"

"Eh?" said the startled butler. "Anything between—— No-o, I shouldn't think so. What put that idea into your head?"

"Well, I only wondered, that's all. I don't go about with my eyes shut, you know."

"The guv'nor isn't class enough for Lady Penrose," said Mr. Markham, shaking his head; "though, mind you, he's a good sort. After the families I've lived in I'm surprised at myself sometimes to think what a lot I think of him. You see, he spent over twenty years of his life on a stool in a bank, and he can't shake it off."

"I suppose it would cling," said Miss Mudge, with a sigh. "Those things always do."

"Properly speaking, he's a three or four hundred

pound a year man," said Mr. Markham judicially; "and it takes time to get the twenty or thirty thousand a year style."

"Wouldn't take me long," observed Miss Mudge, with a bigger sigh than before.

"No; you see we've been used to it all our lives in a manner of speaking," said Mr. Markham. "I wish somebody'd leave me a fortune; I know what I should do if they did."

His voice was so tender that Miss Mudge, in self-defence, glanced somewhat hastily at a fine bed of nettles they were passing.

"I shouldn't waste it on old Mrs. Minchin, for one thing," continued Mr. Markham, after a side glance at her. "And that makes me wonder whether there is anything in what you said just now. Ever since Lady Penrose spoke to him about that old woman he hasn't been able to do enough for her. He's always taking her bottles of port for her rheumatism. Not invalid port, mind you, but the best stuff I have got in my cellars."

Miss Mudge, secretly disappointed at this change of subject, murmured something about "Mr. Carstairs and 'Love's young dream.'"

"It comes to all of us," said the butler solemnly; "none of us can escape it."

"Except me," said Miss Mudge. "I never could

understand people falling in love with each other. It seems so silly, so childish. Mr. Biggs was saying to me only the other day——"

"Biggs!" interrupted Mr. Markham, with something between a sniff and a scowl. "I can't stand that fellow. Whether it's the smell of oil, or his untidy appearance, I don't know. Have you ever seen him with a bit of what he calls axle-grease on the tip of his nose and a smear of dirty oil on his cheek?"

"Never," said the delighted Miss Mudge. "He's always been very spic-and-span when I have seen him. Dressy, I call him. And he's such a fine driver. He says it's because he has got a gift for engineering. I sat next to him the other day when Mr. Carstairs drove us over to Wimbush, and he explained all about motor-cars to me. He says that I have got a very quick understanding."

"Anything else?" inquired Mr. Markham sourly.

"He said a lot of silly things, of course," said Miss Mudge, tossing her head. "But, then, men always do. He's no worse than the others."

"He's a very worthy person, I've no doubt," said Mr. Markham loftily. "The trouble is he is no gentleman. Put him in a suit of overalls, and give him a lump of cotton-waste to clean himself with, and he is satisfied."

"Oh, how funny!" said his companion, with a giggle. "Why, it's like thought-reading."

Mr. Markham turned an inquiring gaze upon her.

"Overalls and cotton-waste," explained Miss Mudge, still giggling. "And *he* said, 'A second-hand dress-suit and a serviette!' And he said something about mistakes, and serviettes and pocket-handkerchiefs that I won't repeat."

"He's got a low mind," said the enraged butler, breathing hard. "If he's not careful he'll get that gifted head of his punched one day."

He stalked along in silent dudgeon until they reached the village, and Miss Mudge, having business to do at the drapery section of the general shop, bade him good-bye. He had fallen a victim at almost their first meeting, and was beginning to realise with some concern that his was only one case amongst many; but in his most pessimistic moments he had never dreamed of Mr. Biggs as a rival.

While he walked home thinking of Miss Mudge, Carstairs and Pope sat by the window in the latter's comfortable sitting-room discussing her mistress. The conversation had been started by Pope, who, as secretary, adviser, and friend, was pointing out to Carstairs the well-known difficulties encountered in trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

"I'm going to do it, though," said Carstairs. "Perhaps in the end I shall earn the gratitude of both."

Pope shook his head. "You know Lady Penrose's views," he said slowly.

"Some of 'em," admitted Carstairs.

"And, knowing them, you deliberately go and invite those two young men down here for a week or two," pursued Pope. "You come down a stranger into this peaceful country spot and at once begin to set people by the ears. You told me you liked Talwyn."

"I like him well enough," said Carstairs.

"It's the dream of his life to marry Miss Blake, and it's the dream of Mrs. Jardine's life that he should," continued Pope. "Naturally the old lady wants to do the best she can for her niece. He's got six thousand a year and a baronetcy, and you are going to help that deluded girl to young Peplow instead."

"He's fifty-five," said Carstairs, "and fifty-five and twenty don't match. He'll live to thank me for my efforts—if he gets to hear of them. I thought you liked the boys."

"So I do," said Pope, "so I do; but that's no reason why I should interfere in affairs of this kind. And I like Talwyn. My idea is to stand aside and

see fair-play. That friend of his, Captain Tollhurst, told me that he had never seen Talwyn so keen on anything in his life. He said it has made him years younger."

"He looks fifty-five in spite of it," said Carstairs. "No, he mustn't do it. It can't be allowed. By my own wits and the willing aid of an intellectual secretary I intend to forbid the banns. Besides, I didn't invite the boys. It was my aunt."

"Handy aunt to have," murmured Pope. "They want a little country air, I suppose? Milk and fresh eggs, and buttercups and daisies. Eh? They make a fuss of you and Mrs. Ginnell just to serve their own ends."

"Very natural, too," declared Carstairs warmly. "Why shouldn't they? And there's no deception; Knight has been painfully frank about it. They're both nice boys—and youth should mate with youth, Pope. Besides——"

"Besides what?"

"I think that Lady Penrose is playing the tyrant. She started with an objection to Knight, and she won't own herself in the wrong. It shall be my task to show her the error of her ways. I shall enjoy it."

"Money is spoiling you, Carstairs," said Pope, shaking his head. "At the bank I never knew a

quieter man than yourself. In those days you were the sort of man that couldn't say 'boh!' to a goose, and now——"

"Now I am going to say it to Lady Penrose," said his friend. "Is that what you mean? To tell the truth, I like opposing her. She is a charming woman, but she always takes it for granted that she is going to have her own way. She's got a queenly manner about her, Pope, that always makes me yearn to be an emperor."

"You'll look a lot like an emperor when she finds it out," grunted Pope. "I shouldn't like to be in your shoes."

"Well, you've got to if anything goes wrong," said Carstairs, with a malicious smile. "I shall put all the blame on you as my secretary. After all, you are responsible for Knight. If you hadn't scraped acquaintance with him I should never have known him. If you will make friends with strangers in restaurants you must put up with the consequences."

"I'll have nothing to do with it," said Pope primly. "I never interfere in other people's business. And Talwyn told me the other day that Miss Seacombe loses her money if she marries without Lady Penrose's consent. Did you know that?"

Carstairs nodded. "I know Lady Penrose," he said confidently. "She is one of the best-hearted women breathing. She might use her powers as a threat, but she would never dream of putting them into action. She is an ornament to her sex, and doesn't know it; an angel in expensive and very becoming gowns. A—a——"

"Go on," said Pope, eying him.

"I think she has rather an amused toleration for me, which rather rankles; and you know what a good book-keeper I used to be?"

"First I've heard of it," said Pope, in genuine surprise. "What about it?"

"I'm going to try and balance the account, and help the boys at the same time. It wants diplomacy, of course, and that's where you come in. When I am in doubt I shall consult you; if I get into trouble I shall put the blame on you. Now, first for advice. What do you suggest?"

"Kidnap Lady Penrose and Mrs. Jardine, and anchor them in the punt, properly provisioned, in the middle of the lake," said Pope, with bitter fluency. "Then send both couples off with Biggs in a car to Gretna Green."

"Abolished years ago," said Carstairs. "Try again."

Pope shrugged his shoulders and, lighting a

cigarette with great care, sat smoking and gazing out of the window.

"Fortunately, Lady Penrose has got the idea that I am a mild, innocuous sort of person," said Carstairs musingly. "She would never credit me with harbouring sinister designs. That helps a lot. In her mind I am cast for Simplicity and Innocence."

"When are Knight and Peplow coming down?" inquired Pope.

"Wednesday week, and the garden-party is on Friday. If they have the sense to lie low for a couple of days nobody will know they are here, and there will be no backing out on the part of our other friends at the last moment. I must have them a day or two before, or the matter will look too prearranged."

"A lot of good you'll do," sniffed Pope. "Lady Penrose will see through you at once."

"They are coming as friends of my aunt," said Carstairs. "Even if she is suspected of ulterior motives there is no reason why I should be. And coincidences will happen. Anyway, the young people will have a pleasant afternoon together."

"Will they?" said Pope. "Lady Penrose will look after that, I fancy, to say nothing of Talwyn

and Mrs. Jardine. The old lady is feeble, but tough."

"And I have a more ambitious project in my mind still," said Carstairs. "We haven't seen much of the world, old man. What do you say to a long trip?"

"Trip?" murmured Pope.

Carstairs nodded. "I haven't got it all thought out yet," he said slowly, "but I am thinking of hiring a yacht in the autumn and going for a long cruise. It's a thing I used to dream of as a young man; and now my idea is to take these people with me and to box them all up together for a few months and see what happens."

"Lady Penrose won't come, if that's what you're thinking of," said Pope.

"We'll see," said Carstairs. "I regard the yacht as a sort of mouse-trap, which I shall bait with Talwyn. That will make Mrs. Jardine nibble, and probably both of them will think it an excellent plan to get the girls away from the young men. I know that they are both getting a little anxious."

"But aren't the boys coming?" inquired the puzzled Pope.

"Of course; but the others won't know it until the last moment. That is, if I play my cards properly. Meantime, 'mum's the word.'"

CHAPTER VII

THE predominant note at Berstead Place was peace. It revealed itself in the placid waters of the lake, in the trim-clipped maze of yew, and the clump of tall elms with its colony of gossiping rooks; in the well-kept gardens and the green slopes of the park. The outbuildings and the yards were so peaceful that hard-working gardeners had been known to fall asleep there while sitting on the handles of their barrows evolving new monstrosities in hybridisation.

The only discord in this Eden was in the bosoms of Messrs. Markham and Biggs. Seldom indeed did these gentlemen indulge in direct speech, but each knew, through the painstaking Miss Mudge, exactly what the other thought of him. The knowledge did not improve their relations, and glances, threatening on the part of Mr. Biggs and contemptuous on the part of Mr. Markham, were a source of considerable interest to their fellow-servants. The page, who regarded the butler with a respect verging on idolatry, spent considerable time in trying to devise ways and means of keep-

ing the chauffeur in his place. As a beginning he tried the raised eyebrows and icy stare of his superior, and, strolling down to the garage one morning in shirt-sleeves and green-baize apron, stood watching the foe at work.

"Halloa, Albert!" said Mr. Biggs, who was pulling out handfuls of grease from the gear-box and stripping it from his fingers on to a piece of brown paper, "how are we?"

"G'morning," said Albert distantly.

"If I'd known you were coming to pay us a visit," said Mr. Biggs, rubbing an itching nose with the back of a soiled wrist, "we'd have had some toffee-balls for you. Wouldn't we Bob?"

"Or sugar-sticks," assented the second chauffeur. "Why, what's the matter with 'is little face?"

"Got a second tooth coming through, I should think," said Mr. Biggs. "You want to rub it, Albert. Rub it with a bit o' bone, or a india-rubber ring."

"When I want your advice I'll ask you for it," said the enraged Albert.

"Right-o," said Mr. Biggs good-humouredly. "If you want to see the inside of a gear-box, now's your time. You can't learn too much, you know. I've been at the job for years, and I'm always learning something fresh."

"I don't want to learn that work," said Albert, with an affected shudder. "It's all very well for people who can't do anything else, but it wouldn't do for me."

"Hark at him!" said the amazed Mr. Biggs.

"Reg'lar little poll-parrot," said Bob.

"I like to be *clean,"* pursued Albert. "I shouldn't like to go about smelling like a gas-works, and leaving black marks on everything I touched."

"P'r'aps you're right, Albert," said Mr. Biggs, who was rubbing his hands hard with a piece of cotton-waste. "Ah, if I'd had your chances what a man I might ha' been."

He shook his head mournfully, and taking up the paper of grease crossed over to put it in a bucket. His foot slipped suddenly, and, with a startled exclamation, he threw his right arm around Albert's neck to save himself from falling. Bending under the shock, the boy pitched face-foremost into the parcel of grease.

"The very place I slipped on last week, Bob," said Mr. Biggs breathlessly. "Gave me quite a shock. Have I hurt you, Albert?"

"*P-ff!"* said the unfortunate youth. "*P-ff!"*

"Lor' bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Biggs, in startled accents. "Look what a mess he's made of himself. How did you do it, Albert?"

"P-w-ff!" cried the boy, still blowing. "You did it a-purpose."

"Poor little poll-parrot," said Mr. Biggs gently. "Give me a bit of that waste, Bob, and I'll try to clean him up a bit. He'd get into trouble if it was known he'd been hanging round the garage instead of getting on with his work. Keep still, Albert!"

"I—I'll tell Mr. Markham of you," said the boy, half-crying with rage. "I'll——"

"Keep your mouth shut," said Mr. Biggs, hard at work with the cotton-waste. "How do you think I can make a job of it while you go on talking?"

"You—you'll—get—the sack for this," spluttered the boy.

"Pure accident," murmured Mr. Biggs. "You ought to be glad that you were there to save me from a nasty fall. Are you?"

The grown-up reply that began to flow from Albert's lips was promptly bottled up by a pad of waste.

"Another second," said Mr. Biggs, turning to his grinning junior, "and he would have said it and been ashamed of himself all his life. And in our garage, too."

"He's got no what you might call gratefulness," said Bob, "else he'd be glad that you'd got that

little spot o' grease in your hand to save his nose from damage."

"I don't expect no thanks," said Mr. Biggs simply. "There you are, Albert," he continued, giving a rotary motion to the handful of waste. "You're cleaner than I've ever seen you, now, and your little cheeks are shining like Ribston pippins. Any time you'd like to give us a look in we shall be pleased to see you."

He turned to his work again, and Albert, after fulminating in the doorway until his jaws ached, turned towards the house in search of sympathy.

"Shouldn't wonder if Markham had something to say about this," remarked Mr. Biggs. "He's always ready to listen to himself talking."

He saw Markham later on, but the butler made no sign. Calm and dignified in preparation for his evening duties, his manner suggested an entire aloofness from such earthly things as trouble-seeking chauffeurs.

He put off this manner with his evening garb, and rising early in the morning for a dip in the lake, a privilege accorded by the thoughtful Carstairs to the few members of his staff who cared to avail themselves of it, thought out a few pungent remarks to improve Mr. Biggs's circulation before entering the water. He saw the chauffeur in front

of him, and, quickening his pace, entered the dressing-shed almost at the same time.

"I want a word with you," he said severely.

"Fire away," said Mr. Biggs, removing his coat and hanging it on a nail. "It's always a pleasure to hear you talk. I heard you talking to one o' the footmen the other day, and it was all I could do to keep from laughing."

"I want to know what you mean by messing the page-boy's face up yesterday," said the butler sternly.

"Poor little chap!" said Mr. Biggs, with a reminiscent smile. "He did look funny; but o' course it was quite an accident. It would have been just the same if you'd been standing there instead of him."

The butler choked.

"I don't think so," he said, at last.

"Only I shouldn't have wiped it off for you," continued Mr. Biggs. "Albert's a nice little chap, only he's got wrong ideas. No ambition; he wants to be a butler when he grows up."

"I don't want to talk to you, my man," said the butler, in superior accents.

"Why, only just now you said you did," retorted Mr. Biggs. "You don't seem to know your own

mind for two minutes together. Too much cellar-work, I suppose."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded the butler fiercely.

"Putting the wine away," replied Mr. Biggs darkly. "The smell of it confuses the intellect. At least, I suppose it's the smell."

"Next time you interfere with the boy I shall report you to the guv'nor," declared Mr. Markham.

"Poor Albert!" said Mr. Biggs. "He wants to be a butler: a tell-tale. If he had any self-respect he'd want to be a man that uses his hands and his head. A chauffeur, say, like me. I can drive a car, and I can mend a car. If a car goes wrong on the road I can jump off and find out what it is. If it's a small thing I can put it right on the road; if it's a big thing, and I've got the tools, I can put it right in the garage. If it's——"

"What is it?" inquired the butler, with a disdainful smile. "An anthem?"

"I was telling you about a man that can use his hands," retorted Mr. Biggs.

"I can use my hands a bit," said the butler, whose temper was beginning to take control.

"To wipe a hot plate with a napkin?" inquired the other.

"Or to knock a little sense into thick heads," said the butler, fastening his bathing-dress as he emerged from the shed. "If it was not for my position I'd do it now."

"Never mind about your position," entreated Mr. Biggs, following him up. "There couldn't be a finer morning for it, or a softer place for you to fall on. Why, it might ha' been made for it."

The butler turned a deaf ear, and rubbing his arms started to walk towards the diving-board. Mr. Biggs gave vent to a series of explosive chuckles.

"Are you making that silly noise at me?" demanded the other, turning and clenching his fists.

"What do you mean by 'silly noise'?" inquired Mr. Biggs, advancing upon him.

"A noise like a sheep with a cold," said the butler promptly, "or an idiot boy that's lost his ma."

"I suppose talking is all you can do," sneered Mr. Biggs, and thrust his lean jaw almost into the other's face.

The temptation was too great, and Mr. Markham, forgetting his dignity, his situation, and above all the example expected of him by his inferiors, struck it. Mr. Biggs, with surprising suddenness, dropped to the ground.

It was a smart blow, and the effect on Carstairs, who was leaning out of his bedroom window to inhale the morning air, was instantaneous. The men were some distance away, but the powerful binoculars in the drawer of his dressing-table were at his eyes and focused in five seconds. Then conscience pricked him, and he dashed out of his room in search of Pope. The latter, querulous in pink pyjamas and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, followed Carstairs to his room with his own glasses dangling from his arm.

"I thought you ought to see it," said Carstairs, who had got his glasses in action again. "I may want your advice as to how to treat the matter."

"Disgraceful!" grunted Pope, leaning out of the window. "Shocking! Markham's going to win this."

"Biggs," said Carstairs.

"Markham's got the science," said Pope. "Ha! Bra——— H'm, h-mm!"

"I think I had better run down and stop it," said Carstairs, with his glasses glued to his eyes.

"You can't run about in pyjamas," said Pope hastily. "It wouldn't do."

"I suppose it wouldn't," said the other. "By Jove! Markham's got it that time."

"Left hook," said Pope. "It's jolted him, but he isn't done yet."

Both gentlemen held their breath as the butler rose staggering to his feet and, moved by a common impulse, took the opportunity to wipe their glasses.

"Markham's going in for too much footwork," grunted Pope. "Seems to think it's a ballet."

He put up his glasses again, and both gentlemen sternly surveyed the stricken field and the two men who were putting so beautiful a morning to so base a purpose.

"This has got to be stopped," said Carstairs, five minutes later. "I won't allow it. It mustn't go on. It—I can't see through your elbow, you know, Pope."

Pope apologised. "Oh, pretty!" he exclaimed. "Very pretty!"

"Yes, but Biggs has got him again," said Carstairs. "He's too strong for him. Just throw on a few things and run down to them, old man."

"Go yourself," said his faithful secretary.

"Perhaps it is best to ignore it," sighed Carstairs. "Perhaps—— Oh, well done, Biggs. Well done."

The glasses remained motionless, fixed on a figure that lay on its back with a slack head and

drawn up knees. Then they followed slowly the movements of Mr. Biggs as, after a glance at the prostrate butler, he bent over the edge of the water and proceeded to bathe his face.

"You've got pretty servants, upon my word," said Pope, as the chauffeur, having finished his ablutions, helped his enemy to his feet and steadied him into the shed. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Same as you would," said Carstairs; "give Markham a rise, but without telling him what it is for. He has given you a very enjoyable ten minutes."

Mr. Pope grinned confusedly, and, with some indistinct reference to a pot and a kettle, girded up his pink pyjamas and stalked out of the room.

Unaware of his employer's benevolent ideas, Mr. Markham spent the first part of the morning secreted in his sanctum with a looking-glass for sole company. Absence from duty was explained by that ever-useful complaint known as a bilious attack. The seventy-ninth peep into the glass at his right eye seemed to indicate that the illness would be of unheard-of duration.

At ten o'clock, Carstairs and Pope having gone off motoring for the morning, he quitted his lair and, taking advantage of all the cover that offered,

steered an erratic course for the village. He had heard of black eyes being painted, and, with a vague hope that Mr. William Higgins, house-painter and decorator, might be equal to the occasion, called at his place of business.

He went round to the back of the house, and Mr. Higgins, who was sitting on a broken chair smoking a short clay and regarding the five hens kept in a wire entanglement patched with string, rose to receive him. A slight but uncontrollable start he attributed to lumbago.

Mr. Markham plunged straight into business. "Can you paint a black eye?" he inquired abruptly.

Mr. Higgins, who had managed to exist for fifty odd years by never declining a job, and always insisting upon being paid, whatever happened, eyed him calmly.

"I've done scores of 'em," he asseverated.

"And keep your mouth shut?" inquired the relieved butler.

"I shouldn't be in the position what I am in if I couldn't," said Mr. Higgins, with quiet dignity. "'Spose you take a seat while I mix up one or two shades for you to pick from."

He indicated the broken chair, and, fetching some pots and colours from an outhouse, seated himself on a box and mixed up paints with a stick of fire-

wood. Satisfied at last, he extricated a piece of rough board from a pile of litter and tried the colours on it.

"They're all good," he said simply. "Take your pick."

He held the board beside the butler's face, raising it slowly to give each tint its due appraisement. The selection made, he loaded his brush. Mr. Markham started back.

"I'm not a wall," he snapped. "You want a camel-hair brush."

"You can have a smaller brush if you like," said Mr. Higgins grudgingly, "but camel-'air, no. It wouldn't do me justice."

He disappeared into the house, and, returning with a smaller brush, made the butler close his eye, and started operations.

"Feels very stiff," said the butler, when he had finished.

"That shows it's a good job," said the artist. "If it didn't feel stiff I should know as there was something wrong. I only wish I'd got a bit o' looking-glass so as you could see yourself."

His gaze was so admiring that the butler's spirits rose.

"Give it a chance to dry even," said Mr. Higgins, pocketing his fee; "don't get laughing, or whistling,

or winking. It'll wear off gradual, and nobody'll ever even dream you'd done anything to be ashamed of. I don't want to talk conceited, but it looks better than the other eye. More life-like."

Mr. Markham went home in the same furtive fashion that he had left it, his first two attempts to "look the whole world in the face" not having been as successful as the encomiums of Mr. Higgins had led him to expect. He managed to reach his quarters unobserved, and, after one horrified glance in the glass, threw himself into a chair and tried to think out his position.

It was clear that a black eye would outlive a bilious attack, and, if he absented himself from his duties for long, he would have to submit to medical treatment. He resolved to return to duty that evening, and, if awkward questions were asked, to attribute his condition to an encounter in the dark with a knob on his bedstead.

He took up his work in the dining-room that evening, and Mrs. Ginnell, who had received a full account of his misadventure from Carstairs, gazed at him in undisguised amazement. She transferred her gaze to Pope and Carstairs, who, in endeavouring to avoid her eye, met that of the butler. Conversation, at first disjointed, ceased altogether before the spectacle of a butler whose sudden increase

of dignity was obviously inspired to counteract the possession of a salmon-coloured eye. A slight squeaking noise, which everybody agreed to disregard, escaped from Mrs. Ginnell.

"Soup's good," said Pope, after a painful pause.

"Excellent," agreed Carstairs. "I think——"

Mrs. Ginnell was offending again. She ended with a moan, and her spoon slipped into her soup as she arose hurriedly and made for the door. "Not well," she gasped, as she passed. "Headache—don't trouble."

The two gentlemen resumed their seats, but the disdainful glance of the butler as he returned from the door was too much for Pope. He got up again. "Headache," he murmured brokenly, with a deplorable lack of invention. "Not well," and, plunging at the door, disappeared.

Carstairs finished his meal alone, thankful that the simmering Markham kept out of view behind his chair. He took a cup of coffee and lit a cigar, starting as he glimpsed the butler's eye again.

"Markham," he said suddenly.

"Yes, sir."

"Go and wash that stuff off your eye at once; you'll get blood-poisoning if you are not careful. If it looks bad to-morrow, go and see a doctor."

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," said the butler.

He poured out a glass of port with grateful care, and went off to his room rejoicing.

"If he isn't a gentleman," he murmured, as he busied himself with cleansing the paint off, "he's the best imitation I've ever seen. Also, he's a sportsman."

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. GINNELL, metaphorically speaking, received Mr. Knight with open arms, Mr. Peplow, who was standing by waiting to be introduced, being almost scandalised at the warmth of their greeting. The correctness of his own left nothing to be desired.

"A great friend of mine," explained Mr. Knight. "I've been looking after him for years. I don't know where he would have been without me."

"I should have been all right," declared Mr. Peplow indignantly.

"Gratitude was never his strong point," sighed Knight, turning to Mrs. Ginnell. "Didn't I get my adopted aunt to give you an invitation down here, so that you could hang around Miss Blake?" he demanded. "Isn't that looking after you?"

"Come in to lunch," interrupted Mrs. Ginnell, with a laugh. "The others are out on the car; Mr. Pope is learning to drive."

"I should like to see the performance," said Knight, seating himself. "Is it his first lesson?"

"Third," said Mrs. Ginnell. "He's got the new

car to-day; something went wrong with the other. He said that the steering-gear failed suddenly."

"What did Biggs say?" inquired Knight, with a huge grin.

"Said that Mr. Pope kept his head wonderfully—and got a half-sovereign," said Mrs. Ginnell, with a twinkle.

"Biggs's own steering-gear is all right, there's no doubt about that," said Knight. "Pity I wasn't on the car; it would have taken a tenner to keep my mouth shut. Anybody hurt?"

Mrs. Ginnell shook her head.

"Sir Edward Talwyn was a little bit shaken," she replied, "but there was no harm done."

"Pity," remarked Knight. "If there had been Biggs would have got more than a half-sovereign from Freddie. Do you see much of him?"

"He comes over sometimes," said Mrs. Ginnell. "His friend, Captain Tollhurst, is staying with him, and they generally come together."

"What sort of man is Tollhurst?" inquired Knight sharply.

"He has travelled a great deal, and had adventures all over the world," said Mrs. Ginnell. "Mr. Pope generally sits listening to him with his mouth open. You'll see him on Friday."

Mr. Knight pondered.

"Young?" he inquired. "Good-looking?"

"Thirty-five to forty, I should think. I shouldn't call him good-looking."

"Good-looking as I am?"

"Better," replied Mrs. Ginnell, without hesitation.

"If you want to laugh, Freddie, laugh," said Mr. Knight severely. "Don't make that silly noise in your plate. When you know Mrs. Ginnell better you'll know that she often says the opposite to what she means. It's her idea of a joke."

"Quite true," murmured the repentant Mrs. Ginnell, beaming at him.

"Your apology is accepted," said Knight. "Freddie, I am waiting for yours."

"Anything you like," said Mr. Peplow, who was attacking his food with great satisfaction. "Make it up yourself, and I'll sign it."

He finished an excellent meal with a gentle sigh of satisfaction, and at Mrs. Ginnell's suggestion adjourned to the terrace for coffee and cigarettes.

"I trust you are being very nice to Lady Penrose," said Knight to his hostess.

"It is a very easy thing to do," she replied. "I like her very much."

"And Mrs. Jardine?" said Mr. Peplow.

"And Mrs. Jardine," assented Mrs. Ginnell.

"I have to like her because I like her niece, Effie Blake, so much."

"Everybody does," said Mr. Peplow, with a gratified flush.

"What they will both say when they discover that I know you I can't imagine," continued Mrs. Ginnell.

"They will be surprised," said Knight, "not to say suspicious. Let me see, where did we meet? Mentone, wasn't it?"

"Let's leave it," said Mrs. Ginnell. "Don't let's take up troubles before they come. Very often they don't come at all."

"I ought to have left Freddie behind," said Knight thoughtfully. "Two is rather overdoing it. But if you had seen the tears well up in his beautiful eyes when I suggested it——"

"Anybody would think this was your place," said the irritated Mr. Peplow.

"It's my aunt," said Knight. "I adopted her in the first instance to serve my own ends. After that I adopted her for herself."

"It's what I should have done in the first place," said Mr. Peplow unexpectedly.

Mrs. Ginnell rose.

"I don't want to be seen blushing at my time of life," she remarked. "Come round to the stables

and see my new pony and cart. James gave it to me last week."

"And now," said Knight, taking her arm after the pony had been duly admired, "come for a stroll with me 'neath yon lofty elms and talk business. What do you think Peplow ought to wear on Friday? And shall we discover ourselves at once, or mix with the crowd and be picked up later, like a couple of lovely shells on a beach?"

"Later, I think," said Mrs. Ginnell. "There will be a lot of people here, and you can emerge from them after a time and renew your acquaintance with Lady Penrose."

Mr. Knight nodded, and carried out his instructions so thoroughly that he was quite disconcerted at the measure of his success. With Mr. Peplow by his side on Friday afternoon he appeared from the direction of the lake, and, observing the figure of Carstairs on the terrace, bore swiftly down upon it.

"Having a good time?" inquired Carstairs.

Mr. Knight looked at Mr. Peplow. Mr. Peplow sighed.

"Excellent," said Knight bitterly. "This is too bad of you, Carstairs. It really is."

Carstairs raised his eyebrows.

"Of course, it's not exactly your fault," continued Knight. "We don't say that, do we, Freddie?"

Mr. Peplow, who was looking somewhat disagreeable, hesitated. "It's his lake, or pond, or whatever you call it," he said, at length.

"So it is," said Knight, nodding, "so it is. It ought to be filled up. It's a man-trap, a positive man-trap."

"You used to admire it," said Carstairs.

"We all have our weak moments," said Knight. "My settled opinion now is that it spoils the place. If it belonged to me I should either have it filled up or keep women-eating crocodiles in it."

"It might spoil the bathing," said Carstairs. "But what is the matter?"

"Matter is we've been hurt in our finest feelings," said Knight. "We've been laughed at. We've been held up to the derision of Tollhursts and Talwyns. Not to mention others. I thought this garden-party was got up for us."

"It was partly," said Carstairs, with a smile.

"Listen to him, Freddie," said Knight.

"I am," responded his friend.

"I've never been made such a fool of in my life," continued Knight. "I came down here to see Miss Seacombe, and Freddie came to see Miss Blake,

and when they are not gummed to the dragons we are."

"Gummed?" repeated the amazed Carstairs. "Dragons?"

"Lady Penrose and Mrs. Jardine," explained Mr. Peplow while his friend was taking breath. "Mrs. Jardine is the worst—she is an old fortune-hunter. When she is not with Miss Blake the poor girl has always got Talwyn at her elbow."

Carstairs surveyed him mildly. "But what has all this got to do with my lake?" he inquired.

"We've been on it," said Knight savagely. "I might have guessed Lady Penrose was up to something or other; she was so agreeable. Seemed quite pleased to see me. She asked us to take her and Mrs. Jardine on the lake for five minutes, and we've been sculling round and round that idiotic little duck-pond for hours."

"Seemed like a lifetime," said Peplow dismally. "Jack had to read poetry to Lady Penrose while I rowed."

"She brought the book with her," said Knight, reddening. "She did it on purpose; she must have known I was coming. She's been laughing at me all the time. I could see it in her eye."

"They've all been laughing at us, I believe," said Peplow. "Talwyn was looking quite intelligent. I

must say I never heard the 'Lady of Shalott' read as Jack read it. Never! Sounded more like the 'Charge of the Light Brigade.' "

"Never felt such a fool in my life," affirmed Knight. "And that fellow Tollhurst had the impudence to walk along following the boat, with Miss Seacombe."

"Both smiling, and pretending not to," added Mr. Peplow solemnly. "I never felt so sorry for Jack in all my life. He looked a perfect fool."

"You mind your own business," said his friend sharply.

"You can't expect to have it all your own way," said Carstairs. "Lady Penrose was too smart for you that time. You should have entered into the joke and read the poem soulfully. I am disappointed in you, Knight."

"I thought he was on the wrong tack, too," said Mr. Peplow. "I did try to wink once, but Mrs. Jardine got it, and I had to pretend I'd got a fly in my eye."

"Well, run away and play," said Carstairs, interrupting a choice remark of Knight's. "You mustn't be seen weeping on my shoulder. Don't bother the girls with your attentions; make yourselves agreeable to other people."

He turned away, and Knight and Peplow after

a moment's hesitation set off to make themselves agreeable to such unfortunates as might have the ill-luck to encounter them. Carstairs stood smiling, and then, seeing Lady Penrose and Mrs. Jardine approaching from the opposite direction, went to meet them.

"I want some tea," said Lady Penrose, as he turned and walked with them. "We have been on the water, and come off hungry."

"Rowing?" asked Carstairs.

Lady Penrose shook her head. "No, I have been sitting in the lap of luxury listening to poetry," she said, with a faint smile. "Mr. Knight read the 'Lady of Shalott' to us. It seemed so appropriate to float on the placid waters of the lake and have that read to one. Wasn't it sweet?"

"I suppose so," said Mrs. Jardine dubiously, "but I thought that Mr. Knight hadn't quite caught the spirit of it."

"M-m," said Lady Penrose, as Carstairs led them to chairs. "I enjoyed it tremendously; surroundings, perhaps."

"I never suspected Knight of a feeling for poetry," said Carstairs innocently. "I thought he was quite an out-of-door man. But it is never safe to judge by appearances. Did he volunteer?"

"Not exactly," said Lady Penrose. "Yes, two lumps, please. Oh, here comes the Baron!"

"Baron!" repeated Carstairs.

"Mrs. Jardine always refers to Captain Tollhurst as Baron Munchausen, for some reason," explained Lady Penrose.

"Isabel! I never do," said the justly shocked Mrs. Jardine.

"Well, you always know whom I mean when I do," replied her friend.

"Quite a different thing," said Mrs. Jardine primly as the unsuspecting captain came towards them, followed by Pope, and sat down at the next table.

"I saw you on the water, Lady Penrose," he said, leaning towards her with a significant smile.

"I am fond of the water, especially when somebody else does the hard work," was the reply.

"Not much hard work on that water," said the captain smiling. "I should like to take you canoeing on the rapids, Lady Penrose."

"I thought they were dangerous," said Lady Penrose sweetly.

"We haven't all got your courage, Captain Tollhurst," said Mrs. Jardine.

"No question of courage, I assure you," said the captain modestly. "A little nerve, perhaps."

"Well, you've got that, Tollhurst," said the admiring Pope. "In the matter of nerve I should think you would be hard to beat. Tell them about the tiger you shot. The one that got you down, I mean. It made me go cold all over."

"Do tell us, Captain Tollhurst," said Lady Penrose languidly. "I am so warm."

"Oh, it was nothing," said the captain,with a slight laugh. "Pope happened to get on the subject of tigers this afternoon, and it reminded me. Brute sprang out on me from the jungle and knocked me over, and I shot it from my pocket with a revolver."

"Fancy!" said Pope, with the air of a showman. "Through his pocket. He hadn't time to draw."

"Must have seemed like a conjuring trick to the poor thing," said Lady Penrose. "Was it hurt?"

"Smashed its jaw," said Pope, speaking for the captain. "His second shot killed it."

"How dreadful!" said Lady Penrose, with a careless shudder. "I'm so fond of animals. I belong to the Society, you know."

"Been more dreadful if it had killed Tollhurst," said Pope, staring at her.

"Yes," said Lady Penrose reflectively as Captain Tollhurst raised his cup and took a couple of hasty gulps. "Yes, I suppose it would."

CHAPTER IX

THERE was a little lull in the conversation, of which Lady Penrose, gazing dreamily at the landscape, seemed serenely unconscious. It was broken by Mr. Pope paying, in low tones, a compliment to the perfections of the tea-cake he was consuming.

"Somebody is in a hurry," said Carstairs, looking round at the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. "Why, Miss Blake!"

The girl, who had appeared suddenly round the side of the house, walking at a tremendous pace, took a laughing breath, and, throwing herself into a chair, pressed her hand to her side and said "Oh!"

"What is the matter, Effie?" exclaimed Mrs. Jardine.

"Oh!" said Miss Blake again. "Oh my!" she added.

Miss Seacombe appeared at that moment, also walking with what Mrs. Jardine considered unfeminine rapidity; the two girls exchanged glances and laughed.

"What have you been doing?" demanded Mrs. Jardine.

Miss Blake's dark eyes twinkled demurely. "Nothing," she replied softly.

"We've had a walking-race with Sir Edward," explained Miss Seacombe. "Effie won."

"Walking race?" repeated Mrs. Jardine, rising and looking about her. "On a hot day like this? Where is Sir Edward?"

Miss Blake shook her head. "He's a bad third," she said, smiling. "He is doing his best, but I don't think he is in very good condition. Oh, here he comes. Poor man!"

A little chorus of sympathy greeted Sir Edward and added to his annoyance. He paused as he reached the group, and, straightening his tall, willowy figure, essayed a smile. His hat was in his hand, and exercise on a hot day had played havoc with the thin locks trained across the top of his head.

"Oh, Sir Edward," exclaimed Mrs. Jardine, in great concern; "how inadvisable to make these girls run on such a hot day! But there—young men never will be reasonable."

"Exercise," replied Talwyn, with an effort. "I—I've quite en—enjoyed it. I am glad I didn't win, though; it wouldn't have been polite."

"It was easy for you to be polite in this case," murmured Miss Blake, as he sank into a chair and wiped his hot face. "What are you smiling at?"

"Nothing," said Talwyn feebly.

"If you mean to suggest that you let us win," said the justly indignant Miss Blake, "it's disgraceful."

"I didn't say so," muttered Talwyn defensively.

"It's men all over," continued the experienced maiden. "They always pretend that they are superior in everything. A woman can do anything that a man can do. Mind that!"

"And do it better," added Miss Seacombe, with a challenging glance around.

"We simply ran away from him," declared her friend.

"Ah! there you are," said Talwyn. "You—you oughtn't to have run in a walking-match, you know."

Miss Seacombe put her cup and saucer down with a little crash. "O-oh!" she gasped. "The idea! We'll have it over again, Effie, and Captain Tollhurst and Mr. Pope shall umpire. Come along, Sir Edward."

A faint remark of Mr. Pope's concerning the heat passed unnoticed. The girls rose and stood waiting, and Talwyn, tugging at the ends of his long, drooping moustache, followed suit.

"Effie!" said Mrs. Jardine sharply. "I won't

have such nonsense. It is much too hot, and besides——"

"Sir Edward wants to," said her niece. "Don't you, Sir Edward?"

"Of course," said Talwyn; "if you wish it. And if you don't think it is too hot for you."

"Go ahead," breathed Tollhurst in his ear. "I'll disqualify 'em. Come along, Pope," he added loudly.

"How absurd!" said Mrs. Jardine, as competitors and umpires moved off. "Really I feel quite annoyed with Effie. I don't know what young women of the present day are coming to. I don't, indeed."

Carstairs shook his head in sympathy. "Don't worry, Mrs. Jardine," he said gently, "I feel sure she will win again."

"Win!" repeated the perturbed lady. *"Win!* I don't mind a scrap whether she wins or not. That is not troubling me at all. Poor Sir Edward," she added, turning to Lady Penrose. "Such a good-natured man. Most unselfish."

"It is hard work for a man of his age," said Carstairs. "Why didn't they challenge the boys? They would have enjoyed it."

"Boys!" repeated Mrs. Jardine, with lifted eyebrows.

"Knight and Peplow," explained Carstairs. "The

two young men who are staying here. You know them slightly, I think."

Mrs. Jardine admitted the soft impeachment by a faint sniff. "Very slightly," she said, after a pause.

"Have you known the boys, as you call them, for long, Mr. Carstairs?" inquired Lady Penrose.

"Some time," said Carstairs, with nicely graduated truthfulness. "Knight is a great friend of my aunt's. Nice bright lads, I think."

"Lads!" exclaimed Mrs. Jardine.

"They seem like it to my advanced years," said Carstairs, with a grimace. "After all, they are not much more, are they? I suppose they have deserted the ladies in favour of a little exercise. Young men prefer sport even to reading poetry to the most charming of audiences."

Lady Penrose laughed. "I had an idea that they were rather fond of ladies' society," she said.

"Oh, they are polite and attentive and all that sort of thing, of course," said Carstairs carelessly; "but in their heart of hearts they prefer cricket. I know that I did."

"And don't you?" inquired Lady Penrose.

"Time has affected my tastes, as no doubt it will affect theirs," was the reply. "In another ten years or so they will probably be thinking of marrying."

"It is possible that they are thinking of it already," said Mrs. Jardine primly.

Carstairs shook his head. "Not at their age," he said decidedly. "They have their way to make yet."

"Young men don't always think of that," retorted Mrs. Jardine tartly.

"True," said Carstairs. "True. You are quite right. I suppose half the misery in the world is caused by rash and improvident marriages."

"And the other half, Mr. Carstairs?" said Lady Penrose languidly.

"By not marrying at all."

Mrs. Jardine suppressed a startled little cough, and endeavoured, but in vain, to exchange glances with her friend. She returned to the subject in hand.

"Young people are very apt to form foolish attachments," she said, shaking her head. "One might call them entanglements."

Carstairs nodded wisely. "Just so," he said slowly. "Young people are naturally impetuous. But there are easy cures for the most desperate cases, I think."

"Cures?" said Mrs. Jardine.

"Change of scene," said Carstairs confidently,

"fresh interests, other affinities. They soon forget."

Lady Penrose regarded him with amusement. "Dear me! What a lot of experience you must have had!" she murmured.

"I never had more than a month's holiday, you know," he reminded her. "At the most dangerous age I only had a fortnight."

"And you found that sufficient for purposes of obliteration?"

"I dare say it would have been," said Carstairs.

"And how long would you give yourself now?"

Carstairs looked up, and their eyes met. "Trip round the world, I think," he said, with marked deliberation.

Lady Penrose gave a slight laugh. "You are improving," she said.

"And, of course, even that might not be successful," said Carstairs musingly.

"It might not," said Lady Penrose, who found Mrs. Jardine's expression somewhat trying. "Still, it is no good taking up trouble before it comes."

"Let us hope it will not come," said Carstairs piously. "The trouble part, I mean."

"Here comes Sir Edward," said Lady Penrose, with an abrupt change of subject. "He must have

won, I think; he is looking very pleased with himself."

"No," said Talwyn, with an effort to look discomfited, "I didn't win. Too bad. I was disqualified almost at the start. Pope and Tollhurst were both against me, so I had to retire. They wouldn't listen to me."

Mrs. Jardine made a slight noise, intended for sympathy. "Where are the others?" she inquired.

Talwyn's grin would not be denied. "Still racing," he said, in an indistinct voice, and covered his mouth with his hand.

He lit a cigarette, and leaned back in his chair with the air of a man who had earned his rest.

"Very stiff, Pope and Tollhurst," he remarked. "No arguing with them."

"But why didn't the ladies retire when you were disqualified?" inquired Carstairs.

Talwyn suddenly caressed his moustache again. "I was a little way behind," he said, with an effort. "Perhaps they didn't know."

"Poor things!" said Lady Penrose indignantly. "Straining every nerve to beat a man who is lolling in an easy chair, smoking."

"They're very keen," said Talwyn. "It was a pleasure to see them. Both of them looking straight to their front and slogging away for all they were

worth. Pope and Tollhurst had to trot to keep up with them. Pope looked as though he might have a temperature."

He gave a little sigh of satisfaction, and, stretching out his legs, sat gazing at his boots. "As a matter of fact," he said, after an interval, "I never was very fond of the strenuous life. I've had to live it when travelling sometimes, but it was from necessity, not choice."

"At our age——" began Carstairs.

"I was always like it," interrupted Talwyn hastily.

Carstairs eyed him thoughtfully. "Do you like shipboard?" he inquired. "There's not much hard work there. I've been thinking lately—— I've been wondering whether I wouldn't go for a cruise."

"P. and O.!" said Talwyn decidedly. "You can't beat it."

"I was thinking of something different," said Carstairs. "My idea was a yacht. If I could get a few friends to come with me and keep me company, I think it would be nice to hire a steam yacht and go cruising at our pleasure. What do you think?"

"Ripping!" ejaculated the other. "If you could get the right people," he added, with a glance at Mrs. Jardine.

"Everything depends upon that, of course," said

Carstairs. "If Lady Penrose and Mrs. Jardine would do me the honour——"

The two ladies looked at each other in surprise. It is one thing to go to a friend's house and drink a cup of tea, but a cruise—a long cruise, perhaps! Their thoughts flew to clothes.

"Would you be away for long?" inquired Lady Penrose.

"As long as you like," was the reply. A reply which set Talwyn and Mrs. Jardine gazing at each other.

"When do you propose to start?" asked Lady Penrose.

"October, I thought. Have the summer here and go South for the winter."

"It sounds delightful," said Mrs. Jardine, with another glance at Talwyn. "I suppose my niece is included in the invitation?"

"Of course," said Carstairs; "and Miss Seacombe."

"She can't go unless I go," said Lady Penrose thoughtfully.

"Exactly," said Carstairs.

Lady Penrose coloured a little. "It is very kind of you," she said slowly. "I must think it over."

"We will both think it over, if we may," said Mrs. Jardine. "It is very kind of you, Mr. Car-

stairs. So far as I am concerned the proposal is most tempting."

"Noise heard without," said Talwyn suddenly, with an uneasy attempt at facetiousness.

"It is Effie, principally," said Mrs. Jardine, in resigned accents.

Miss Blake's voice was certainly high, but so also was Miss Seacombe's. An apologetic, low-toned rumble appeared to belong to Messrs. Tollhurst and Pope. Talwyn shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Here is the athlete!" exclaimed Miss Blake, coming up and regarding him fixedly.

"I was disqualified," murmured Talwyn, rising.

Miss Blake wiped her hot face and turned to her friend, scorning to notice the amused glances that were passing between the men. Her own expression reminded one of a cat that has lost a particularly fine mouse through its own stupidity.

"Who won?" inquired the venturesome Talwyn.

Miss Blake's face took on a deeper shade, but she made no reply.

"We had to disqualify 'em both," said Pope, in tones of oily regret. "And within twenty yards of the finish. Awful pity."

"Why didn't you let us know that Sir Edward had given up?" demanded Miss Seacombe.

"Disqualified," corrected Talwyn.

"It's not usual," said Pope. "There is no reason for telling the other competitors. It is never done."

"Never," corroborated Tollhurst. "What good would it have done you?"

"Might have put you off your stroke," said Pope. "You were walking splendidly at the time. It was a pleasure to watch you. I quite enjoyed it."

"I've no doubt," said Miss Blake bitterly. "That is men all over," she added cryptically.

She threw herself into a chair, and after a slight struggle with herself accepted a glass of iced lemonade from the hands of Carstairs. A suggestion from Pope that the race should be walked over again—with other umpires—was received with silent disdain.

"Been having a most interesting conversation while you were amusing yourselves," said Talwyn to Pope. "Carstairs is talking of chartering a yacht and taking us all to foreign climes."

"O-oh!" said Miss Blake, clasping her hands and turning on Carstairs a smile that dazzled him. "If all men were like him!"

"Even only a little bit like him," said Miss Seacombe, with a hostile glance at the other three.

"Where are we going? when do we start?" inquired Miss Blake, turning to Carstairs again.

"There is nothing settled yet," said Mrs. Jardine.

"Mr. Carstairs has only just mentioned it, and I am not sure that we can go. Not at all sure."

"I am going," said her niece decisively. "If I can't go as a passenger, I shall go as a stowaway. But you are a splendid sailor, aunt, and a voyage would do you good. You haven't been looking quite yourself for a long time."

"I'm well enough, thank you," retorted Mrs. Jardine.

"And it would do me good," continued Miss Blake. "I have not said anything about it, but for some time past—— It is not a laughing matter, Mr. Pope."

"Sorry," said the offender humbly. "You look the picture of health. And the way you walk!"

"Appearances are deceptive," said Miss Blake coldly.

"If your health is in inverse ratio to your appearance, and performances, you ought to see a doctor," said Pope solemnly.

"Three doctors," said Carstairs, regarding her closely.

"I am not going to quarrel with *you,*" said Miss Blake, smiling at him. "Do come and sit here and tell me all about it. Is Mrs. Ginnell coming?"

"Most certainly—if we go. She is quite enthusiastic about it."

"If we go!" repeated Miss Blake.

"We don't care to go alone," said Carstairs. "You must talk to Mrs. Jardine about it. Talk to her about your health. I fancy from her manner that she does not quite realise what a serious condition you are in. A long voyage, with pleasant society, might restore you. And, of course, we will take a doctor."

CHAPTER X

"WHAT is all this talk about a yacht?" inquired Knight, as they sat smoking in Pope's room after dinner that night.

"Yacht?" said Carstairs, looking up.

"Thing that floats on the water and is propelled by sails or steam," said Knight dryly.

"I've read of 'em," said Pope, tenderly removing the band from a fat cigar. "In fact, I have occasionally seen them. Graceful things, most of them. Sit the water so well. There is something about a yacht——"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Knight. "That's just what I want to get at. What is all this about a yacht?"

"I had an idea of hiring one," said Carstairs mildly, "and sailing away to distant solitudes in search of peace."

"Far from the young and their noisy methods," added Pope, with a grin.

"Curious thing is, they haven't said anything to us about it," said Knight, with a perplexed look at

Peplow. "What does it mean, Freddie—any idea?"

Mr. Peplow coughed.

"It's a perfect bombshell," pursued Knight. "It has blown all my arrangements to the winds. I was going to Scotland for two or three months in the autumn to stay with an uncle. This will be the second year I shall disappoint the old chap. He won't like it, I'm afraid."

"Who told you anything about it?" demanded Carstairs.

"Mrs. Ginnell," replied Knight. "She is quite excited about it. She has gone to the library to read books of travel and furbish up her geography. I'm afraid I rather disappointed her. I told her that I could only accept provisionally."

"Provisionally?" repeated Carstairs, staring at him.

Knight nodded. "I don't go unless Miss Seacombe goes, of course," he replied. "You couldn't expect it, Carstairs, and wild horses and a steam crane combined wouldn't get Freddie on board unless Miss Blake goes. He is quiet, but determined."

"And it is quite possible that if you go they won't," said Carstairs. "I wasn't going to say anything to you about it yet, but I forgot to warn my aunt. She is as precipitate as you are. She is much too young for her years."

"But you couldn't go without us," said Knight. "I mean, you wouldn't."

"Never knew him to put his tail down like that before," murmured Pope, who was sitting by the open window looking at the moonlight.

"We oughtn't to have come down here," said Knight thoughtfully. "You ought to have sprung us as a pleasant surprise at the last moment."

"Quite impossible," said Carstairs. "It would look far too much of a put-up job. I had to let Lady Penrose know that we were acquainted. Hence the reason—one of them, I mean—of your visit here."

"It ought to be very jolly if it comes off," said Knight.

"Very," assented Carstairs. "Pope and I are looking forward to a most amusing time."

"Something like a happy family I saw once at a fair," said Pope, watching the smoke of his cigar as it floated out of the window. "It consisted of a cat, a dog, a monkey, and doves and little white mice all shut up together in a cage. I think that the peace was kept by a judicious system of overfeeding."

"Very good way, too," said Knight. "But there are sometimes conditions at sea in which any feeding

at all is unwelcome. We must have this trip, if it's only to see you in a gale."

Pope laughed comfortably. "I am an excellent sailor," he retorted. "Why, five years ago, coming round the Land's End in heavy weather, I was the only passenger aboard that turned up to meals."

"Triumph of the flesh over the spirit," said Knight.

"Even the second mate, to whom I gave a cigar, threw it away after a couple of whiffs," continued Pope. "I feel certain that half a dozen more would have finished him."

"We don't doubt your word for a moment," said Knight. "But when you have made an end of your boasting we will talk business. I have a sort of hopeful idea that Lady Penrose will accept in any case."

"What makes you think so?" inquired Carstairs.

"Instinct," replied Mr. Knight. "Something seems to tell me she will. I can't explain to anybody, especially to you. I just feel it in my bones. What do your bones say, Freddie?"

Mr. Peplow's bones not being in a communicative mood, Knight turned towards Pope.

"I don't know," said that gentleman hastily. "You leave my bones alone."

Knight nodded with a satisfied air. "I see," he

said darkly. "That's good enough for me. You are quicker than I thought. It is never safe to judge by appearances. You are a kindred spirit, Pope. We understand each other."

"I'm blest if I know what you are talking about," blustered Pope.

"No matter," said Knight, rising and going over to him. "Have you got a cigar about you? Not one of the same brand that you gave to the poor mate."

He took one from the well-filled case and, lighting it delicately, returned to his seat.

"I wonder what sort of a sailor Lady Penrose is?" he said, blowing out a cloud of smoke and regarding it thoughtfully.

"And old Mrs. Jardine?" said Mr. Peplow.

"She is an excellent sailor, I understand," said Carstairs. "But I don't understand your sudden concern for her welfare."

"I was thinking of mine," said Mr. Peplow modestly. "Things would be much brighter if Mrs. Jardine had to stay in her bunk most of the time. She has an extraordinary knack of turning up in the most unexpected places."

"You shouldn't be in unexpected places," said his friend, shaking his head at him.

"And she seems to regard me almost as though

I were some dangerous animal," continued Mr. Peplow.

"Absurd!" said Pope and Knight together.

"Vanity is his besetting sin," added Knight. "My own opinion is that Mrs. Jardine regards him more in the light of a pertinacious blackbeetle than anything else. One day she will put her foot down, there will be a faint apologetic pop, and Freddie will disappear."

After the frivolity of his younger friends it was a relief to Carstairs to turn to the sedate enthusiasm of Talwyn. He was as eager for the expedition as Carstairs himself, and lost no opportunity of trying to persuade Mrs. Jardine to become a member of it. He got her to consent at last, provided that Lady Penrose would also join the party.

"And she is hesitating, rather," said Mrs. Jardine.

"What is the difficulty?" inquired Talwyn.

"There are one or two possible difficulties in the way," said Mrs. Jardine vaguely. The possible difficulties had been discussed with Lady Penrose, and both ladies had decided to do nothing in haste that they might repent of at leisure. The appearance of Knight and Peplow at Berstead had been something of a surprise to them; they had an uneasy idea that there might be a greater one in store.

"In which case I really don't think I want to go," said Lady Penrose. "The prospect of being on shipboard with Mr. Knight for some months is not alluring. I have a great objection to that young man."

"Sir Edward is very keen," said Mrs. Jardine, with a sigh. "I really don't think——"

"And I gather that Captain Tollhurst is invited," said Lady Penrose.

"Very interesting man," murmured Mrs. Jardine.

"Very," agreed her friend. "He must have been a great reader in his time, I should think, mostly of boys' books of travel and adventure."

"Sir Edward thinks a lot of him," said Mrs. Jardine defensively. "I must say I rather like him."

Lady Penrose nodded. "Anyway, Captain Tollhurst doesn't matter much," she said. "As for the others, we must wait until we hear from Mr. Carstairs. He is coming on Wednesday afternoon with Mrs. Ginnell. I will sound him then."

"I will come, too, if I may," said Mrs. Jardine. "I like Mrs. Ginnell; and perhaps it would be just as well for me to hear exactly what is proposed. A hint or two might be of service."

She tried a few on Wednesday afternoon, and, as she confided to Lady Penrose afterwards, she might as well have tried them on the teapot. Her opinion

of the simple-minded goodness of the man was improved, but her respect for his intelligence was not. And Mrs. Ginnell, alert and youthful, was equally obtuse. She saw only one side of the picture: a cheerful company, a bright sun, and summer seas. It was a relief to Mrs. Jardine's mind when Mrs. Ginnell had finished her third cup and they all adjourned to the garden.

"I do hope that you and Mrs. Jardine have made up your minds to come," said Carstairs to Lady Penrose, as they walked slowly down a box-edged path. "If you don't I'm afraid the whole scheme will fall through."

"I don't see why it should," was the reply. "There must be plenty of people who would jump at it."

Carstairs shook his head. "Besides, I don't want plenty of people," he said slowly, "although, of course, I should extend a hearty welcome to any friends of yours that you might wish to bring."

"And suppose that you didn't like them?" said Lady Penrose, playing for an opening.

"It wouldn't matter."

"I'm afraid that I am more particular, or, if you like, more selfish," said Lady Penrose. "I shouldn't care to go for a long voyage with people that I did not like."

Carstairs stole an appraising glance at her, and

as a result decided to run a slight risk of disaster. "Of course," he said cheerfully; "so I will give you a list of my guests, and you can strike out those you don't like."

Lady Penrose laughed. "Nonsense," she said, colouring slightly. "It has nothing to do with me. I couldn't dream of doing such a thing."

"Then you will come?" said Carstairs.

Lady Penrose hesitated. "Suppose you make the same offer to Mrs. Jardine," she suggested, "and give her the list."

"I—I prefer to rely on your judgment," said Carstairs.

"Who is coming?" she asked, after a pause.

Carstairs went through the names. "And I understand that my aunt has invited Knight and Peplow," he concluded. "They are staying with us, you know."

"Yes," said Lady Penrose slowly. "Yes—I am not very fond of Mr. Knight."

Carstairs gave a little wave of the hand. "Strike him off, then," he said cheerfully. "I'm afraid my aunt will be very disappointed, but still——"

"I can't possibly interfere with your arrangements," said Lady Penrose, with a little laugh of annoyance. "And what do you think Mrs. Ginnell would say?"

"She is very set on your coming," said Carstairs, "and will be very much upset if the whole thing falls through, as it will if you don't come. I am sure that you will not let your plans be upset by a youngster of that age. Apart from that you would like to come?"

"Very much."

"Then that is settled," said Carstairs. "I absolutely decline to let any half-baked boy upset my plans in that fashion. It is making far too important a person of him. Don't you feel that?"

"I don't think that *he* would," said Lady Penrose.

"You will come?" said Carstairs. "Please say 'yes.' If you don't I can never look my poor aunt in the face again."

Lady Penrose hesitated. "Thank you very much," she said at last, with a faint smile. "You have put so much responsibility upon me that I couldn't refuse, even if I wanted to."

"That's right," said Carstairs joyfully. "And now let us go and tell Mrs. Jardine. Next Monday I shall set out in quest of the safest and sturdiest craft I can find; speed no object."

Mrs. Jardine received the news calmly, and, with perfect confidence in her friend's judgment, gratefully accepted the invitation. Details (par-

tial) furnished after the visitors had departed left her less satisfied.

"It ought to be very pleasant," she said slowly. "It is a pity that Mr. Carstairs is so slow of comprehension. However, there is plenty of time for us to change our mind if we wish."

"I am going," said Lady Penrose. "I have promised."

"You have made promises before," said Mrs. Jardine, with a wise nod.

"What do you mean?" inquired her friend, with a little heat.

"And I know how binding they are," concluded Mrs. Jardine ambiguously.

Lady Penrose looked at her, but, being blessed with an excellent memory, refrained from pursuing the subject. She sat gazing at a bed of geraniums and turning over in her mind an idea that had suddenly occurred to her.

"Do you think that Mr. Carstairs is as single-minded and ingenuous as he seems?" she inquired.

"Certainly I do," said Mrs. Jardine. "It's the only defect in his character so far as I can see. I am not sure that I wouldn't call him simple. In a nice, pleasant way, of course, but certainly simple."

"I wonder!" said Lady Penrose, knitting her brows.

At the same time Mr. Carstairs, suffering from severe twinges of conscience, was calling himself a rascal of the deepest dye.

CHAPTER XI

"BE good," said Mr. Biggs.

Mr. Bob Watson, his assistant, who had got the afternoon off, waved his hand and strode away jauntily. Nearly at the gate, however, he paused, and, eying a small figure that had just entered, turned round and signalled to Mr. Biggs. The small figure, supporting an enormous left cheek with a not overclean hand, scowled at him darkly and continued on its way to the garage. Mr. Watson, much interested, followed.

"Yes, sir?" said Mr. Biggs, with a wink at Mr. Watson. "What can I do for you, sir? Why, bless my soul, I seem to know that face! And yet somehow I don't seem to know it. Do you know it, Bob?"

Mr. Watson shook his head. "It's a perfect stranger to me," he said, in a puzzled voice. "Seems to have a sort of likeness to that silly little page, Albert."

"It's much better-looking than Albert's," said Mr. Biggs; "better nourished, too."

"It's something like our Albert might be, though, after kissing a honey-bee what didn't want to be kissed," maintained Mr. Watson.

"I've got a message for you from the guv'nor," said the boy, speaking with difficulty from the right-hand side of his mouth.

"It *is* Albert!" said Biggs, with an air of great surprise. "Well, I never did. How well you are looking, Albert! Why, your left cheek is almost grown up."

"Toothache," said Albert indistinctly. "Abscess. I've got to go to the dentisht."

"Well, run away, Albert," said Mr. Biggs, with a benevolent smile. "We don't want to keep you. But it's a pity to spoil that cheek."

"You've got to take me," said Albert, with a horrible leer of triumph. "Mr. Carstairs said so. To Bosham, thirteen miles off. I like motoring."

Mr. Biggs's smile vanished with a suddenness that was almost startling, and he stood gazing in helpless fury at the small figure before him.

"I like motoring," repeated Albert, making a praiseworthy attempt to smack his lips. "And you are to start at once. Mr. Carstairs said so. Mr. Markham has been on the 'phone, and I have got an appointment at three. Hurry up!"

Hardly able to believe his ears, Mr. Biggs caught

his breath, and for one brief moment toyed with the idea of putting both cars out of action. Then his gaze fell on the grinning Watson, and his expression changed.

"If you want anything for yourself, Bob," he said, taking a pace towards him, "you've only got to say so, you know."

"I don't," said the other, retreating. "So long, Be good."

The few but powerful words wrenched from Mr. Biggs died away in the recess of the garage. He tore his jacket from its peg, put on his cap with a bang, and, walking to the front of the car, started the engine. The unexpected appearance of the butler provided the finishing touch to his discomfiture.

"Why don't you make haste, Albert?" demanded the latter, with a fine disregard of Mr. Biggs.

"I did tell him to hurry up, sir," said the boy. "I suppose he is doing his best. I think he is."

A weird, choking noise, instantly suppressed, proceeded from the interior of the suffering Mr. Biggs.

"Get out of the way," he said, addressing the butler; "I'm coming out."

He came out so suddenly that the butler had to side-step with more haste than dignity. The car went on for sixty or seventy yards, and, pulling up,

waited for the indignant Albert to overtake it. His attempt to get up in front was promptly frustrated by the chauffeur.

"In behind," said that gentleman briefly.

"I ought to ride in front by rights," said the boy rebelliously.

"You ought to be buried by rights," retorted Mr. Biggs dispassionately. "Get in, unless you want me to drive off without you. And hide that face in a pocket-handkerchief—if you've got one."

He sat looking straight in front of him, turning a deaf ear to the instructions given to the boy by the butler, who had come up; instructions on the need for haste if the appointment was to be kept and trouble with Mr. Carstairs avoided. Also that it was a business visit, and no "joy-riding" was to be permitted.

"And consider yourself lucky," concluded Mr. Markham impressively, "that you have a car to ride in and a fairly capable man to drive you."

The fairly capable man let in his clutch so sharply that Albert nearly rolled off his seat as the car started off. Then he adjusted himself comfortably, and, leaning back, prepared to enjoy himself as much as his malady would permit. It was his first motor-ride, and for a time the aching tooth was almost forgotten.

The village street was somewhat busy, and Mr. Biggs, slowing down through the traffic, went slower still at the sight of a stylish figure in front of the general shop. He brought the car to a standstill, and Miss Mudge, with a bright smile, turned towards him.

"Unexpected pleasure," declared the chauffeur politely.

"Where are you off to?" inquired Miss Mudge, with a glance at the small figure behind.

"Bosham," replied Mr. Biggs. "I'm taking this thing to have a milk-tooth pulled out."

"Poor Albert!" said the girl, with womanly sympathy. "Does it hurt you much, dear?"

"Who are you 'dearing'?" croaked the offended youth. "Of course it hurts. If the chauffeur doesn't hurry up I shall miss my appointment."

"Oh, what a temper it is in!" exclaimed Miss Mudge, drawing back in pretended alarm. "Don't let me detain you, Mr. Biggs. Good-bye."

"There's no hurry," declared the chauffeur. "You mustn't take any notice of Albert. Nobody does. Why not hop on and come along with us?"

Miss Mudge shook her head. "I should like to," she said, "but I'm only off till half-past four. My lady said I was to be sure and be in by then. She's going out."

"Half-past four?" said Mr. Biggs. "Why, there's heaps and heaps of time."

He leaned across and opened the door, and Miss Mudge, after a moment's hesitation, stepped in and took the seat beside him.

"I hope my hat will stick on," she said doubtfully. "It wasn't made for motoring."

"I'll go easy," said Mr. Biggs, regarding it with open admiration. "If I might say so, it suits you wonderfully."

Miss Mudge sighed. "You ought to have seen the one I had last year," she said. "It's a pity that fashions change so. You no sooner get something that suits you than something else comes in."

"How is this for speed?" inquired Mr. Biggs, who was doing a gentle twelve miles an hour.

"Just right," said Miss Mudge. "I like going slow; you can see the scenery better. Talking about scenery, did you know I'm going with my lady in the yacht? She's promised to take me. It ought to be heavenly."

Mr. Biggs's face fell. "Must you go?" he inquired.

"Why, I *want* to go," said the other. "I wouldn't miss it for worlds."

The chauffeur's face grew more sombre. "And

leave all your friends behind?" he said reproachfully.

"Perhaps they'll be glad to get rid of me," said Miss Mudge flippantly. "Besides, I sha'n't leave them all behind; Mr. Markham is coming to look after things. Mr. Carstairs thinks a lot of him, I am told."

"I suppose Markham told you so," said the chauffeur, trembling with wrath.

The girl shook her head. "Everybody says so," she replied softly.

Mr. Biggs drove on in silence. Vitriolic things trembled on his lips, things unfit for the delicate ears of Miss Mudge.

"I wish October was here," she said presently. "I've always wanted to see the world, and it's delightful to see it that way. No trains to catch, no packing up and moving from place to place. It's heavenly. If I don't have a good time it won't be my fault."

Mr. Biggs grunted, and, looking straight before him, drove on steadily.

"Don't you wish you were coming?" inquired the girl, leaning towards him.

"Do you wish I was?" countered Mr. Biggs, also leaning a little bit out of the perpendicular.

"I shouldn't mind," was the reply.

Mr. Biggs leaned a little more in her direction, until a tendril of hair brushed lightly against his cheek. He drove on in a kind of pleasant dream, until a sensation of hot air playing on the back of his neck brought him back suddenly to earth again. He turned fiercely, and the pallid face of Albert receded to a safe distance.

"Hurry up," mumbled that young gentleman. "I shall miss my appointment."

"I'll 'hurry' you," said the indignant chauffeur, in a fury. "How dare you stick that unwholesome face of yours against a lady's? What do you mean by it? *What* did you say?"

"I said it wasn't so close as yours," replied Albert, "and neither it was. I've been watching you. You were told to get me to the dentist's at three."

To Miss Mudge's great surprise, Mr. Biggs touched something on the wheel and the speed increased every second. When the speedometer was showing thirty miles an hour she looked at him inquiringly, and in return got a faint wink from his left eyelid. The speedometer climbed up to thirty-five and then the needle began to drop back again.

"Something wrong," said Mr. Biggs, with another faint movement of the eyelid. "Sparking-plug, I think."

He pulled up fifty yards further on, and, ignoring the request of Albert for information, raised the bonnet and peered in. Then he came back again, and, requesting the girl to stand up, raised the lid of the seat and took out some tools.

"Anything wrong?" she inquired.

"Nothing much," he replied. "A matter of ten minutes or so. I'm sorry for 'Face-ache,' but it can't be helped. That's the worst of motor-cars. One moment you are bowling along at forty miles an hour, and the next you are waiting for somebody to give you a tow to the nearest garage. I remember once, before I came to Mr. Carstairs—"

"Why don't you hurry up?" demanded Albert.

"Sorry, sir," said Mr. Biggs, in tones of deep respect. "I'll be as quick as possible. Perhaps you'd like to get out and stretch your legs a bit? I feel as if I could work faster if I didn't have your eagle eye on me all the time."

Albert cast a malevolent glance upon the tittering Miss Mudge, but made no reply, and the chauffeur, whistling in the preoccupied fashion of a busy man, set to work. The girl got out and sat on the bank, rising after a time to loiter up and down the road.

"Haven't you nearly finished?" she said at last.

"You've got to get me back at half-past four sharp, you know."

"That'll be all right," said Mr. Biggs, looking at the clock. "There's time to draw all Albert's teeth and rig him up with a set of new ones. I've just finished."

He closed up the bonnet and, putting his tools away, started the engine, and climbed to his seat, followed by Miss Mudge.

"It's a shame," she giggled, as they sped on. "How can you tease the poor child like that?"

"Can't be helped," said Mr. Biggs, in a loud voice. "Nobody can prevent accidents. But for that we should have kept our time."

He was rewarded by an understanding glance from Miss Mudge, and, somewhat pleased with himself, drove the rest of the way in high spirits.

"Look slippy, my lad," he said amiably as he pulled up at the dentist's. "Shut your eyes, open your mouth, and mind you don't swallow the nippers."

"Five-and-twenty past three," said Miss Mudge, as the door opened and the boy disappeared.

"You'll be home at a quarter past four," said Mr. Biggs. "Just take care of the car for a moment; I want to get something."

He went off up the road and disappeared into

a confectioner's, returning after a short interval with a large box of chocolates dangling from his forefinger by a piece of pink ribbon. He placed them on the girl's lap and, declining a share in favour of a cigarette, noted with warm approval the correctness of her table manners. He felt that he could sit and talk to her for hours.

"A quarter to four," she said suddenly.

"He won't be a minute now," said the other confidently.

Miss Mudge consumed three or four more chocolates, and then, closing the cardboard box, sat tapping it impatiently with the tips of her fingers. Her restlessness communicated itself to the chauffeur, and two or three times, with an air of hurrying things, he stood up and peered at the dentist's windows. They stared blankly at him in return.

"I shall get into trouble," said the girl uneasily. "You'd better drive me home as fast as you can, and then come back for him."

Mr. Biggs shook his head. "He's a disagreeable little beast," he said slowly, "and he'd jump at the chance to make mischief if he came out and found us gone. Very likely go by train to Pettle and walk six miles home from there to make trouble."

The church clock, in a marked, deliberate fashion, struck four.

"I'll fetch him out," snarled Mr. Biggs. "I'll——"

He dashed up the steps and pressed the bell. A maid-servant, after a decent interval, opened the door.

"He's in the waiting-room," she said, in reply to the chauffeur's question.

"In the waiting-room!" exclaimed Mr. Biggs. "Why doesn't he come out?"

The maid stared at him. "He's waiting to be attended to," she said firmly.

"Wait——" gasped Mr. Biggs. "Wait—— Where is the room? I want to see him."

He followed close on her heels, and burst into a stiff, cheerless-looking room furnished with soiled copies of *Punch* and illustrated papers of the year before last. Albert, who was reading a paper, put it down and eyed him languidly.

"What's all this about?" demanded the chauffeur. "Why aren't you ready? What have you been doing?"

"Missed my appointment," said Albert, with a faint sigh. "I *told* you it was for three o'clock. But I don't mind waiting; this is a most interesting story."

"You hurry up," said Mr. Biggs truculently, "else you'll be sorry for it, you miserable little toad!"

"You've no right to talk to him like that," said a middle-aged woman, who was the only other occupant of the room. "In my opinion the boy is a perfect little gentleman. He's already given up his turn to two people; and I'm sure he's suffering."

"Very good," said Mr. Biggs, after a merciful attack of speechlessness. "Very good; I'll tell Mr. Carstairs of this."

"Mr. Carstairs wouldn't mind; it's the thing he would do himself," retorted Albert in a saintly voice. "He——"

"Ready for you now," said the maid, opening the door and beckoning.

Albert rose, and, with a somewhat disappointed glance at the clock, went out.

"We shall just do it," said Mr. Biggs, returning to the car. "I don't suppose it'll take more than a minute now."

He started the engine and resumed his seat. Ten minutes later he switched it off again, and sat in a state of suppressed fury listening to the complaints of his distressed companion.

"It's all your fault," she said hotly. "If you hadn't been so clever teasing the boy it wouldn't have happened."

"You enjoyed it," urged Mr. Biggs. "I saw you smiling."

"You won't see me smile again in a hurry," said Miss Mudge grimly. "But go on, put the blame on me! Anything more you would like to say?"

She pitched the box of chocolates on the floor of the car, and, opening the door, stepped out and paced restlessly up and down the footpath. At exactly twenty minutes to five the dentist's front door opened, and Albert, with a somewhat improved appearance, paused on the top step for a few words with the maid. He sauntered down the steps just as Mr. Biggs started the engine.

"Where have you been?" demanded the chauffeur, glaring at him. "Don't you try and tell me that it has taken him all this time to draw a tooth."

"No, it wouldn't be true," said Albert. "He found another tooth with a hole in it; so I told him he might as well stop it. He's got a thing like a sewing-machine, and——"

He drew back appalled before the frenzy in Mr. Biggs's face.

"Are you going to start, or are we going to stay here all day?" inquired Miss Mudge. "Get up, Albert."

"It's your place," said the boy quickly.

"I'm going in behind," said the girl.

"I'll come, too," said Albert.

"Not with me, you won't," said the girl, getting in and closing the door. "Make haste and get in. There's a box of chocolates on the floor you can have."

"No, he can't!" grunted Mr. Biggs, as the car started.

"They're my chocolates," said Miss Mudge, "and I can give them to who I like. Pick them up, Albert."

The boy, with his eye on the chauffeur, obeyed.

"Now eat them."

Albert shook his head, but, the command being repeated, drew a large chocolate, decorated with a crystallised violet, from the box, and delicately bit off the end. Slight sucking noises testified to his enjoyment, and after a minute or two of very justifiable nervousness he settled back in his seat and gave himself up to the full enjoyment of the position.

"Thank you for a very pleasant afternoon," said Miss Mudge, with a toss of her head, as she descended at the gate. "And thanks so much for getting me into trouble."

"It wasn't my fault," said the hapless Mr. Biggs.

"Being done by a babe in arms like that!" said Miss Mudge, with a glance at Albert. "I'd be

ashamed of myself. Thank goodness you're not coming to sea with us!"

"I don't know so much about that," said Mr. Biggs. "Perhaps I can if I want to. Perhaps Lady Penrose won't take you—now."

Miss Mudge slammed the gate.

CHAPTER XII

MR. BIGGS put the matter of the yacht right next day. It appeared from his own showing that he could be of great use in the engine-room, while, on the other hand, as an honest man and an Englishman, he had a great objection to staying at home on full pay with nothing to do for it. Permission was accorded so readily that, relating the matter to Mr. Watson afterwards, he was half-disposed to regret that he had not asked to go as a passenger.

"Cheek'll do anything almost," assented Mr. Watson. "What do you know about a ship's engines?"

"More than you know about a car's," retorted the other. "When a man's got a head for machinery—which you haven't—nothing comes amiss to him. I haven't seen the machinery I couldn't understand, yet."

"That shows your sense," said Watson. "It's no good going out of your way to look for trouble, I mean. However, I hope you'll have a good time;

I'm going to. I wonder the guv'nor don't take the housemaids and the gardeners as well; they could lend you a hand in the engine-room."

As a matter of fact, the rest of the staff, with one exception, manifested no desire to tempt their fortunes on the stormy deep. Board wages and an easy existence for some months was the height of their ambition. The exception was Albert, and, until his desires were made known, a little confusion was caused by his unusual behaviour.

"I'd sooner have a ghost in the place," declared Pope to Carstairs one day. "The little beast simply haunts me. What's the matter with him?"

Carstairs shook his head. "I seem to have seen more of him lately," he remarked. "I have nearly fallen over him twice."

"Whenever I turn my head, there is that infernal boy somewhere near," said Pope. "And there's a curious pale smile about him I don't like. D'ye think it's mental?"

"No, no!" said Carstairs hastily. "Of course it isn't. Don't give way to such fancies; they're unhealthy. Your head is all right."

"Mine?" gasped his incensed friend. "Mine? I am talking about the boy's. He's getting very strange in his manner. Only yesterday he stole up behind me and picked a bit of fluff off my coat. I

didn't know he was there, and it gave me quite a turn."

"That's odd," said Carstairs, looking perplexed. "He picked two bits of fluff off me this morning. At two different times."

"Let's have him up and question him," said Pope, crossing to the bell. "Tackle him gently."

"Bait your coat with a piece of fluff," said Carstairs, with a grin; "that would give us an opening."

Albert, whose conscience was no clearer than that of the average page, received the summons with some trepidation. The slow arranging of Mr. Pope's pince-nez added to his discomfiture, and he stood trying to think out replies to any misdemeanours with which he might be charged.

"Have you quite recovered from your visit to the dentist?" inquired Carstairs.

"Me, sir? Yessir," replied the boy.

"You don't appear to be quite well," said Carstairs musingly.

"Perfectly well, sir," said the puzzled Albert. "Thank you, sir."

"Then what do you mean by it?" inquired Pope, taking off his folders and shaking them at him threateningly. "What do you keep getting in my way for and following me about? And Mr. Carstairs?"

"Nothing, sir," said Albert. "I—I didn't know you had noticed it, sir."

"That's an admission," said Pope, turning a red face to Carstairs.

"I—I wanted to ask you something, sir," said the boy, turning to the latter.

"Well?"

Albert twisted his hands together. "I wanted to ask—whether—I could go," he said desperately.

"Go!" repeated his astonished employer. "Why, of course you can. Why didn't you ask before?"

The tension of Albert's features relaxed, and was succeeded by a radiant smile. "I thought there mightn't be room, sir," he said simply.

Carstairs turned with a perplexed gaze to Pope. "Room?" he repeated slowly. "Room?"

"On the boat, sir," explained the boy, staring in his turn.

A startled grunt from Mr. Pope and a sudden exclamation from Mr. Carstairs added to his mystification. Carstairs was the first to recover.

"Of course," he said, smiling. "Very thoughtful of you; but I have no doubt we shall be able to find room somewhere."

"If we couldn't," said Pope, with great solemnity, "we'd make it."

Albert eyed him dubiously, and, retiring in good

order, closed the door and danced downstairs in an ecstasy of delight.

"That settles it; we must now redouble our efforts to get a satisfactory craft," said Carstairs. "It would never do to break faith with Albert."

"He would be much more disappointed than Lady Penrose," said Pope. "We had better go up to-morrow and see that yacht broker Talwyn mentioned. Tollhurst offered to come with us. He—he is going to help me buy guns and things."

"Guns?" said his friend, staring.

"Must have a shot-gun," replied Pope, reddening. "One thing is, it will be useful down here. And perhaps a rifle. Every man ought to know how to use one. Might be useful on board. You never know."

Carstairs groaned. "You've been talking to Tollhurst," he said accusingly. "All right. We'll mount a couple of brass cannon as well. What about a black flag?"

Pope turned a deaf ear. At the age of fifty he had resolved to become a sportsman; a resolution partly due to the narratives of Captain Tollhurst, and partly to the rabbits which came out in their thousands in the park at sunset. Up to the present he had contented himself with taking sighting-shots at them with a walking-stick, develop-

ing an accuracy of aim which he felt sure would prove of value later on. Birds—half a mile distant—had also been satisfactorily accounted for.

They took the business of the yacht first next day, a story of a rhinoceros and Captain Tollhurst helping to beguile the tedium of the journey. A story told so modestly that only the thoughtful listener could appreciate the high courage and resourcefulness displayed by the survivor.

It was a matter of surprise to Carstairs, who had never given the matter much thought, that the choice of steam yachts of the tonnage required was a somewhat limited one, but by what the broker described as an extraordinary slice of luck the very craft they were looking for was at that moment undergoing repairs at Southampton. Photographs and plans seemed eminently satisfactory, and they left after making an arrangement to view the *Starlight,* fourteen hundred tons, three days later.

"It would have been more interesting," said Tollhurst, as they returned to the car, "to have hired a small sailing yacht."

"You mean more dangerous," said Pope accusingly. "So far as I am concerned, I prefer size and security."

The captain laughed and shook his head. "A little element of uncertainty, that is all," he replied.

"Not for the ladies," said Pope solemnly.

"I had forgotten them," was the reply.

"I expect we shall have all the uncertainty we want," said Carstairs amiably; "but if you find the voyage palls we can always land you and Pope at some place where you can risk your lives. And pick you up afterwards—if there is anything to pick up. Now, what about these guns?"

Tollhurst gave a direction to Biggs, and five minutes afterwards they pulled up at a gunsmith's and laid the foundations of a small but efficient armoury. A hammerless ejector gun, a sporting rifle, a rabbit rifle, and an automatic pistol of the newest pattern went home with Pope in the car.

"To-morrow," he said, toying with the little rifle, "I will get my hand in on a few rabbits."

Tollhurst nodded. "I will come with you," he said; "but I should advise the gun to begin with. A rabbit is a small target, you know."

"You know best," said Pope, somewhat ungraciously. "I thought there would be more sport with a bullet, that is all. The shot-gun is too certain."

"Sheer butchery," said Carstairs, with a glance at Tollhurst.

"They ought to have a chance," said Pope judicially. "However, if Tollhurst doesn't think so, perhaps I had better take the gun."

"Take the rifle by all means, if you wish," said Tollhurst. "The head is as good a place to hit them in as any," he added, with a return glance at Carstairs.

It was a scarcely perceptible glance, but Pope saw it and lapsed into silence, which, except for an occasional grunt, he maintained until the end of the journey. Upon one thing he was determined: he would astonish them all next day.

He arose at six next morning, and went out for a little preliminary rifle practice. Ten shots at the trunk of a beech tree at fifty yards furnished no data, the wood simply swallowing the bullets without revealing the place of entry. An empty tomato-can perched on a post deflected them at ten yards' range in a way that was almost uncanny. If a tomato-can could behave in that fashion, what might be expected of a rabbit? Perturbed in spirit, Mr. Pope returned to the house and, meeting Biggs on the way, gave him the rifle to clean.

In the result he resolved to thin the rabbits out (his own expression) with the gun, and soon after six that evening, accompanied by Tollhurst, he set off to a sandy bank on the confines of the park. Trees and gorse afforded good cover, and, stealing up with the caution of a Red Indian, he discharged both barrels at a little group forty yards distant.

The earth swallowed them up immediately, including the two he had hit.

"I'll swear I winged them," he said, after a search.

Tollhurst nodded. "Gone to die in their holes," he said briefly. "Often happens. We must try further along now."

They went on in silence, Pope with his lips pursed and his gun ready. Restless rabbits, unable to stay in one place for more than a second or two at a time, he ignored. He wanted something less mobile, and it presented itself at last in the shape of a huge elderly buck rabbit which was sitting under an oak tree taking the air. Trembling with excitement, Pope held his breath, and was just taking careful aim, when the veteran arose and went for a gentle constitutional behind a clump of gorse.

"It's gone," whispered Pope.

"Plenty more," said his friend. "Be quicker next time."

Mr. Pope attributed his failure to that advice. Left to himself, he felt sure that he could have shot rabbits. As it was, bits of gorse were blown to pieces and patches of turf rose into the air. At the end of an hour Tollhurst, looking in the direction of the house, muttered something about dinner.

"I'll come when I've got a rabbit," said Pope grimly. "You go."

Left to himself, he flitted noiselessly about and blazed away at intervals, until at length, tired and dispirited, he sat down and drew out his cigarette case. A figure approaching in the dusk drew near, and revealed itself as Mr. Biggs.

"Any sport, sir?" inquired the chauffeur respectfully.

Pope told him. He also referred in scathing terms to the acrobatic proclivities of his quarry.

Mr. Biggs looked longingly at the gun. "Long time since I shot any, sir," he said, with a sigh.

"Can you shoot?" inquired Pope.

"I've shot thousands in my time, sir," said the chauffeur, "when I was a boy, at home."

Pope took up his gun and held it out to him. "Kill a few thousands now," he said vindictively.

Mr. Biggs thanked him and withdrew noiselessly. An occasional report indicated that he was doing his best to carry out instructions. Pope, leaning back with a pleasant sense of fatigue, went on smoking. It was not until he had finished his third cigarette that he saw the chauffeur returning.

"Any luck?" he called out.

Mr. Biggs shook his head. "I won't blame them," he said frankly. "I suppose my eye is out, or my hand; perhaps both."

"But——" said Pope, and pointed to three rabbits the other was carrying.

"Not mine, sir," said Biggs. "Wish they were. I picked them up as I went along."

Pope stared at him. "They must be mine, then," he said, in a puzzled voice.

"Unless anybody else has been shooting," said Mr. Biggs, gazing afar off. "They're fresh killed. You must have been shooting better than you thought."

Mr. Pope thought so, too, and, extending his hand for the rabbits and the gun, set off in the direction of the house. Mr. Biggs accompanied him half-way, and then, with a respectful "Good night," turned off.

Tired but happy, Pope reached the house, and, rejecting the offer of a footman to take his burden, made his way to the dining-room, and stood framed in the doorway. A slight exclamation from Tollhurst called attention to his presence.

"Well done!" said Carstairs.

Pope smiled. "Not much of a bag," he said modestly.

"Poor things!" said Mrs. Ginnell, shaking her head at him. "Murderer!"

"Not at all," murmured Pope.

CHAPTER XIII

THE inspection of the yacht was so satisfactory that Carstairs made up his mind on the spot, and for the next month or two had many pleasant jaunts to Southampton to mark progress. Members of the expedition spent the time in providing things for the voyage according to their several tastes; the fact that Albert had laid in a stock of three mouth organs and a tin whistle coming in for much adverse comment on the part of Mr. Biggs.

The *Starlight* weighed anchor on a fine morning in early October. A light breeze and a slight touch of autumn in the air added to the enjoyment of the voyagers, whose numbers were now increased by an unnecessarily good-looking young doctor named Maloney, and Miss Flack, a spinster of mature years and lifelong friend of Mrs. Jardine. Seated in little groups on deck, Mr. Carstairs' guests, idly watching the passing craft, looked forward with some zest to a life of exciting but harmless adventure. The doctor, who had made several voyages, was pleased to find himself regarded as

an authority on all things nautical, and was at once elevated to a position from which the other men sought in vain to remove him.

"I should have thought the sea was the worst place in the world for a man of your profession," remarked Knight, after listening to one or two episodes.

The doctor stroked a very fine moustache. "Why?" he inquired.

"No practice," was the reply.

"You're wrong," said Maloney. "It's what I come to sea for. Suppose I was ashore and you had got to lose a leg, say. Would you come to me?"

"I would not," said Knight bluntly.

"Exactly," said Maloney, nodding. "But you've got no choice here. That's where I have you. If you get anything wrong with you, you don't turn over the Medical Directory and pick out your man; you come to me. And you can't upset my diagnosis. That's a great thing. That's a comforting thing."

"For whom?" inquired Peplow seriously.

"All of us," said Maloney, lowering his voice as two of the ladies passed. "If you pass away because I treat you for muscular rheumatism by removing your appendix, it's much better for your peace of mind—to say nothing of my own—you

shouldn't know that but for a pardonable error you might have lived another fifty years."

Mr. Peplow shuddered. "Are you an Irishman?" he inquired thoughtfully.

The other shook his head. "Not since my grandfather," he replied. "When I was born the brogue got mislaid. Besides, I am too serious-minded for an Irishman."

"I never have any use for a doctor," said Knight casually, "but if I had I should choose a man of some age."

"I'm just the right age," said Maloney. "Thirty; just young enough to be interesting, and just old enough to know how to."

He strolled off with a smile, and dropping into a chair between Miss Seacombe and Miss Blake, just vacated by Mrs. Jardine, at once proceeded to justify his statement.

"Who shipped that chap?" demanded Knight, turning to Pope.

"Carstairs," was the reply. "He said that he reminded him of you. Jolly chap; knows his job, too. He's got a splendid lot of instruments; I have seen them."

"You'll see them again," said Knight solemnly. "Mark my words if you don't. What a romantic

end to a useful and well-spent life, to be buried at sea a thousand miles from land!"

It was a matter for congratulation that when they emerged from the shelter of the Isle of Wight they found the Channel as smooth as the proverbial mill-pond. The evening air was bracing and just cool enough to make the change to the warm dining-room acceptable. Half-way through the meal Mr. Pope paid a heartfelt tribute to the cook, warmly seconded by Mr. Peplow.

"It must be a beautifully built ship," said Miss Flack; "there is absolutely no motion."

"And not at all stuffy," said Mrs. Jardine.

"It is difficult to realise that we are at sea," said Pope, looking around.

"It is a difficulty that time will solve," said the doctor. "I had the same difficulty myself once, and twelve hours later I thought that I was in a boat-swing that fancied itself a roundabout."

"Did it—did it upset your digestion?" inquired Miss Flack delicately.

"It did not," said the doctor. "It upset my head."

"Vertigo," explained Pope, with a vise nod.

"Edge of the fore-scuttle," corrected the doctor, "and one of the hands who was coming up at the time. He got a very interesting case of concus-

sion. He'd have been in bed till the end of the voyage if the second mate hadn't taken the case out of my hands. He used a counter-irritant in the shape of two clumps on the head. I did think of sending an account of the case to the *Lancet*."

Miss Flack looked mystified. "How interesting!" she murmured, and turned with some relief to help herself to trifle.

The next two days passed with equal serenity, a condition of things for which, judging from their remarks, his gratified guests seemed to hold Carstairs responsible. Reading, conversation, and games made the time pass pleasantly enough, the devotion of Mr. Knight to law books of a singularly uninviting appearance calling for much surprised comment. It was whispered—by the admiring Mrs. Ginnell—that he was going to read for the Bar on his return to England, but after one morning during which a lot of silly people, including several old enough to know better, walked round and round the ship in line for the pleasure of passing him on tiptoe and saying "*Hsh!*" as they approached, he threw up his studies in disgust.

He awoke on the fourth day at sea to find his bunk out of the horizontal and a floor which was never in the same place for two seconds together. He shaved himself carefully and, grinning with

anticipation, went on deck. The fresh morning air, with a touch of rain in it, was delightful, but the sea was of a dirty brown and the sky overcast. The deck looked wet and desolate; the bows rose and fell again with a resounding slap.

"Dirty weather?" he inquired of the boatswain, who was passing.

"Not yet, sir," was the reply, "but I fancies as we shall get it in the Bay. If I was you, sir, I should eat all I could stow away to-day."

"Oh, I'm all right," said Knight sharply. "I was thinking of the others—the ladies."

Mr. Tarn nodded, and turned to gaze with some interest at Miss Mudge, who, appearing hastily from the companion, passed them in a series of little tottering runs. Between runs she stood swaying to and fro in an effort to regain her balance and gazing with much distaste at the tumbling seas. The boatswain, with a deprecatory glance at Knight, stepped up to her and steadied her with a powerful arm about her waist. She turned with a faint scream.

"All right," he said reassuringly, "I've got you; you're quite safe."

"Safe!" repeated Miss Mudge. "You're choking the life out of me. I thought the machinery had got hold of me."

"I thought you was going to fall," said the boatswain, letting out a reef. "Is that better?"

Miss Mudge's head dropped to his shoulder and her eyes half closed. He led her to a seat and sat down, still supporting her, until an angry bark from the bridge sent him about his business. Deprived of his support, moral and physical, the girl rose and, steering an erratic course for the companion, disappeared below.

Seats at the breakfast-table began to empty before the conclusion of the performance. The dining-saloon had suddenly become stuffy and odorous, the smell of fried engine oil being particularly noticeable. Bulkheads creaked, and articles on the table became endowed with movement.

"We shall have to have the fiddles rigged for lunch, I expect," said Tollhurst.

"There is a little bit of a sea on," said Pope, as he arose and assisted Mrs. Ginnell to the door. "Perhaps I had better help you to your cabin."

The couple disappeared, followed with longing eyes by Markham. The under-stewards, jealous of his authority, watched him gloatingly. Pale of face and compressed of lip he stuck to his post wondering whether he could endure to the end.

"I feel unwell," said Carstairs, rising suddenly. "And I don't care who knows it," he added, look-

ing at the grinning faces before him. "Markham, you are feeling it, too. You had better get to your bunk. There will be quite enough left to—to look after—the survivors."

He vanished with some precipitancy, followed by the butler. Mrs. Jardine, the only lady left, rose from her chair and with an undisturbed mien went off to the drawing-room. The men went up to the smoke-room and lit cigarettes. Through the doorway on the leeward side they caught glimpses of white-topped seas scurrying past. Mr. Peplow, to observe them better, left the smoke-room and did a stately cake-walk to the side, where he remained, heedless of the rain and spray.

"We are going right into it," observed the doctor returning from a visit to the doorway.

Talwyn stared at him disagreeably. "Going into it? We are in it, aren't we?" he demanded.

"Not on the edge of it yet," replied the doctor cheerfully.

Talwyn grunted and, regarding his cigarette with some disfavour, threw it away. Then, muttering something in his pocket-handkerchief, he got up and went out. Within ten minutes the doctor was alone.

The wind increased as the day wore on, and at luncheon Mrs. Jardine, his only companion, rose before the meal was finished and, with a look equally

compounded of surprise and indignation, quitted the saloon. By next morning it was blowing a gale, which continued with unabated violence throughout the day.

It was not until the day after that that Mr. Knight, who had been keeping body and soul together with judicious doses of brandy and water, swung his feet over the edge of the bunk and lowered himself slowly to the floor. His neglected watch had stopped, and he was even in some doubt as to the day of the week. He opened the door, and, clutching at anything that offered support, made his way to Mr. Peplow's cabin, and sank exhausted on the velvet settee.

"Halloa!" said Mr. Peplow feebly, turning a dull eye on him. "What do you want?"

"Bright and entertaining society," retorted Knight, with weak ferocity.

His friend made no reply, but, turning away, closed his eyes and tried to forget his troubles in sleep. Knight, lying on the settee, listened drearily to the creaking of timbers, the distant crash of crockery from the stewards' pantry, and the monotonous sound of the bilge as it washed to and fro. The door opened and the horrible reek of a cigar assailed his nostrils. He turned a languid head to see Maloney standing in the doorway.

"Just had a look into your cubby-hole," he said, entering. "Thought perhaps you had gone overboard."

"Take—it—away," said Knight.

The doctor looked puzzled. "Oh, the cigar!" he said, with a laugh. "I'll hold it outside the door. It's one of Pope's best. He has just given me the box. Says he never wants to see one again."

"What's—time?" inquired Knight, with an effort.

"Just gone four. Are you going to get up?"

"Where are—the—others?" inquired Knight.

"All in bed except two," was the reply. "I've had my hands full, I can tell you. There's still a big sea running. Miss Seacombe describes it as mountainous."

"Is—is she up?" inquired Knight, starting.

"And Mrs. Ginnell," said Maloney. "Both made an effort and got up to breakfast. Slight relapse after breakfast, but turned up to lunch. They've got ten times the pluck of the men. I've got 'em both up on deck wrapped up in shawls in lounge chairs."

Knight groaned, and putting his feet to the floor got up and looked out at the porthole. With another groan he returned to the settee.

"Don't you worry about them," said Maloney

gently; "they're all right. I'm reading poetry to them."

"Poetry?" gasped Knight.

"Keats," said the other, nodding. "It's Miss Seacombe's favourite. After dinner I'm going to give her some of my own. I shall tell her it's Shelley. There's one little thing of mine——"

"Oh, go to blazes!" moaned the indignant Knight. "Are they strapped in their chairs?"

"They are not," said the doctor. "If you had ever heard me read poetry you would not ask me that question. Why not make an effort and get up and come and hear me? It's only a question of will-power."

"Go away," said Knight.

"Talk to yourself firmly. Say over six times: 'I *will* be a man; I will not lie about like a dying duck in a thunderstorm in pink pyjamas with blue stripes undone at the neck.'"

"This — is the doctor — Freddie," observed Knight bitterly.

"Send him away," faltered Mr. Peplow.

"It's curing you I would be," said the doctor. "Trying to shame you into your trousers. I cured a man of the sea-sickness once by sitting on his diaphragm. It was the indignity of the thing that he didn't like. In the wild desire to kill one of

the best doctors in England he forgot all about his illness."

Knight closed his eyes.

"Well, I must be going," continued Maloney. "I mustn't keep the ladies waiting. I suppose you haven't got a voice lozenge about you?"

He took two or three sharp puffs at his cigar, which had nearly gone out, and vanished in a cloud of malodorous smoke.

There was a long silence, broken only by a faint moan from Mr. Peplow. Then Knight, fired by the story of the owner of the outraged diaphragm, rose unsteadily to his feet, and tottered back to his cabin. A small figure, lying on its back on his settee with its knees drawn up, eyed him wanly.

"Albert!" exclaimed the astonished Knight.

The boy pointed a trembling finger at a siphon of soda which was rolling about on the floor with a broken plate and some dry biscuits. As a defence it seemed incomplete.

"Then I had—to—lay down," said Albert, with a shudder.

He turned over on his left side, drew his knees up to his chin, and composed himself to slumber. By a great effort Knight managed to retrieve a couple of biscuits and the soda and cut his foot on the broken plate. A stiff peg of brandy and

soda, together with the biscuits, helped to revive him. He took his clothes from the floor and, with trembling fingers, proceeded to dress himself.

He gained the deck with some difficulty and, swaying with weakness, stood holding on to a rail. After the atmosphere below the strong, clean air was delicious, and he did his best to ignore the heaving seas and a couple of performing fishing-boats. Slowly and carefully he made his way aft to the sheltered spot where Maloney was reading to his fair patients.

A little delighted exclamation from Mrs. Ginnell and a smile from Miss Seacombe greeted his arrival. Mutual congratulations were exchanged.

"He had better have your chair," said Miss Seacombe to the reader.

The doctor rose, and Knight, having by dint of skilful balancing taken the chair without mishap, bestowed a smile, right and left, on his fair companions. It was returned with interest, and Mrs. Ginnell, taking possession of his left hand, patted it affectionately.

"He has got the turn now, I think," said the doctor, regarding him with a professional eye. "I have done my part; all he wants now is careful nursing."

Knight, still weak and dizzy, looked at the vol-

ume of poems in the other's hand and smiled maliciously.

"Page fifty-seven," said Maloney, thrusting it into his hand, "fourth line. Take it easy to begin with and don't strain your voice. It's time I went off and looked after the other poor sufferers."

CHAPTER XIV

A SOMEWHAT disillusioned Mrs. Jardine appeared at the breakfast-table next morning, but until the ship arrived at Gibraltar most of the company preferred to take their meals in their cabins. Flying visits to the deck were made by one or two members, but like the trial-flights of fledglings, they were of short duration, Mr. Pope on one occasion having to suffer the indignity of being helped back to his nest by Albert.

The stability of Gibraltar gave universal satisfaction, and it was felt that Great Britain had deserved well of her citizens by acquiring it. Delightful to know that when you put your foot down there was something there to meet it.

The Rock left behind, they came in for an unbroken spell of fine weather. Port after port helped to break the monotony of life on shipboard, and Carstairs noted with pleasure the good-fellowship prevailing between his guests. Only Knight and Peplow, conferring apart, had occasion to describe the smiling good-nature of Lady Penrose and Mrs. Jardine as barefaced duplicity.

"They have never paid me so much attention," said Knight bitterly.

Mr. Peplow groaned.

"I'm a sort of human magnet," continued his friend. "Yesterday afternoon the smoke-room was empty and I took Winifred in to see me smoke a cigarette. Lady Penrose came in to witness the performance two minutes later, and within a quarter of an hour I was the centre of an admiring circle of five."

"And Talwyn was with me," said Mr. Peplow. "That is to say, he was boring Effie with his conversation, and I went to the rescue."

"And when you are boring her he comes to the rescue," said Knight. "The whole fact of the matter is, this ship is too small; but even ashore I get a large following. That chap Tollhurst is trying to make himself amiable to Lady Penrose. He hangs about her like a shadow, and when she is not on guard over me he takes over her duties. Wonder where Talwyn picked him up?"

Mr. Peplow shook his head. "Don't matter where he was picked up," he murmured, "trouble is, he is here."

"What is it?" asked Maloney, sauntering up. "A mothers' meeting? or a Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society? Why aren't you in the smoke-

room? Pope is doing card-tricks. He is standing with his eyes shut to show there is no deception, while we draw cards. The opportunity was too much for my politeness. He has muffed two tricks already."

"You have set a bad example," said Knight, as Miss Blake, followed by Talwyn, slipped furtively out of the smoke-room and went forward.

Mr. Peplow followed his friend's glance, and in a careless fashion started to move off.

"No," said the doctor, shaking his head. "Better not."

Mr. Peplow drew himself up and stared at him.

"Wrong tactics," said the unmoved doctor. "Let her get fed up with him."

Mr. Peplow, fiery red in colour, turned and looked appealingly at Knight.

"And miss you," continued Maloney. "Cake is a nice thing, but one can have too much of it. Let her go without it for a day."

"I don't understand you," said Peplow, with great dignity. "Cake!"

"Or anything else sweet and wholesome," replied the doctor, looking him over. "You be guided by me. I've seen a lot of this sort of thing. Taken a hand in it, too, when I was young. Oh, I know just what's going on, and watching it gives me a

lot of quiet pleasure in the few moments I can snatch from my duties. It's no use getting stuffy; I can't help having an observant eye, any more than I can help interfering in lost causes. All big natures are like that."

Mr. Peplow was saved a reply by the appearance of Pope from the smoke-room. His voice came booming along the deck.

"Of course the trick failed," he complained. "When you tell a man to draw a card and put it back, and he puts it in his pocket instead and disappears, the thing's impossible. Where's that doctor?"

"Time for me to disappear," said Maloney. "I never attempt to defend an impossible position. Come down in my cabin and have a chat. Subject: Dowagers and how to circumvent 'em."

He disappeared, and Knight and Peplow, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

The doctor's subject was one that might have been of interest to Miss Mudge, who had been for some time suffering from the unwelcome chaperonage of Miss Flack. Miss Mudge would have been the first to admit that she came in for an undue amount of attention; what she would not admit was that she required any assistance in dealing with it. Besieged by the engine-room, the fore-

castle, and the steward's pantry, she more than held her own—a fact which only increased the ardour of the victims.

At meal-times she was free. The deck was empty and the passengers below. At such times, with a book for use and some needlework for show, it was her practice to lead the way to the bows followed by some delighted seaman carrying a deck-chair. At lunch-time on the day following Mr. Pope's card-tricks the chair of state was borne by Mr. Tarn, the boatswain. Not by happy chance, but owing to a few plain words aimed at a couple of hands who were hanging about waiting to perform the office instead of going on with their work.

"How's that?" he inquired, planting the chair.

Miss Mudge arranged herself and let fall a ball of wool, which the boatswain pursued. He returned winding up the slack.

"The other side, I think," said the girl, rising.

Mr. Tarn made the adjustment, and, stroking a yellow moustache, stood watching her with a world of patient devotion in his fine blue eyes.

"Wonderful pleasant, ain't it?" he ventured at last.

Miss Mudge yawned. "Rather boring," she said. "Nothing seems to happen at sea."

"But you've been ashore," said the boatswain.

"Oh, yes, I've been ashore," said the girl languidly, "but it isn't like England, you know. I don't call it civilised. I am not used to roughing it."

"Anybody could see that—with half an eye," said the boatswain. "The first time I see you, I says to the carpenter, 'That's a dainty little piece of goods,' I says."

"And what did he say?" inquired Miss Mudge carelessly.

The boatswain was not prepared for the question. "It don't matter what 'e said," he replied guardedly, "but I told 'im if ever he said it agin I'd give him something for himself he'd remember all his lifetime."

Miss Mudge's languor disappeared. "I don't like sailors," she said tartly. "I suppose they have to go to sea because nobody will employ them ashore."

"There's sailormen and sailormen," said the boatswain tenderly; "there's me, and there's the carpenter. Are you keeping company with anybody? I'm not."

The girl shook her head and half-closed her eyes. "Certainly not," she said slowly. "I don't like men. Heaps and heaps have asked me, but I've always said 'No.' I prefer my liberty."

The boatswain gazed at her with ardour. "Perhaps you haven't met the right one," he said hopefully.

There was no reply, and he ventured a little closer. The second mate was on the bridge, a man of kindly nature and tolerant views. Moreover, he was out of earshot.

"Why don't you come for'ard a bit oftener?" breathed the boatswain.

"Come forward? What for?" inquired the girl, bending over the stocking she was darning.

Mr. Tarn came a little closer still. "Ter see me!" he said tenderly.

"Phh! I see quite enough of you," was the reply. "Besides, you're the sort of man that looks best a long way off."

The boatswain drew back, gasping. The little bit of broken looking-glass nailed to the side of his bunk told a much more flattering tale. He gazed at the fluffy head bent over its work and tried again.

"'Sides which," he said slowly, "there's more breeze for'ard, and if there's anything to see you see it fust, and—and—— Why, your little shoe's undone!"

He knelt down to adjust it, just as a sharp cough

sounded from behind. He turned his head to see Mr. Markham emerging from the smoke-room.

"Pore stooard," he said, as the butler approached; "he's got a cold, ain't he? Or p'r'aps it's a fish-bone stuck in 'is throat. Well, he ought to wait till they've finished."

"You've no business talking to lady passengers, bo'sun," said the butler sharply.

"You're right, matey," retorted Mr. Tarn. "This ain't bisness, it's pleasure. I'm teaching the lady 'ow to tie knots; she won't undo this not if she tries for hours and hours."

"What?" exclaimed the girl sharply.

"When you want to take 'em off," said the boatswain, beaming at her as he rose to his feet, "you come to me. You come to me every morning to do 'em up and every night to undo 'em. Bless you, I like work. Here, I'll darn that for you."

"Bo'sun, you forget yourself," cried the butler, as Miss Mudge drew back quickly.

"What, ain't you gone yet?" inquired Mr. Tarn, with affected surprise. "What about washing up them plates and licking the grease off the knives? Don't look like that; you'll break something."

"I wish you two would go away and quarrel somewhere else," said the highly gratified Miss

Mudge. "How do you think I can get on with my work?"

"What's the matter?" inquired Mr. Biggs, who had just sidled up. "Are these men annoying you?"

"They make me nervous," said Miss Mudge. "I'm so afraid there'll be bloodshed."

"Butler," said Mr. Biggs gravely, "you ought to be below; your engines'll stop if you neglect your stoking like this. I looked down through the skylight as I passed, and I saw the furnace-doors all open in a row waiting for you to shove your burnt-offerings into 'em."

"I don't want any of your vulgarity," returned the butler hotly. "That's not the way to speak of your master and his friends."

"Get off to your duty, my man," said Mr. Biggs. "I shouldn't like you to lose your job—you'd never get another. And I *was* going to tell the bo'sun that the first officer wants a word with him, but I don't think I will."

The boatswain, with a languishing glance, withdrew somewhat hastily, and Mr. Biggs, leaning against the side with his back to the butler, bent over Miss Mudge. Mr. Markham, after a short inward struggle, returned to his duties.

"You'll cause a lot of trouble if you're not careful," said Biggs.

"Me?" said the girl plaintively. "I'm sure I can't help it. You don't think I want to be pestered out of my life by a parcel of silly men, do you? I'd much rather be alone. I don't want to talk to anybody. I want to sit quiet."

Her companion coughed. "The idea of the bo'sun worrying you with his silly talk!" he said, after a pause. "Cheek!"

"It's no sillier than what I am used to," said Miss Mudge resignedly. "He's no worse than the others. I rather like him in a way; he reminds me of a friend of mine who's a sailor. Leastways, he's an engineer—a real engineer."

"What do you mean by a 'real' engineer?" demanded Biggs, somewhat shortly.

"Why, a proper engineer," replied the girl. "A gentleman who has got certificates and passed examinations, and all that sort of thing."

Mr. Biggs controlled himself by an effort; experience had taught him the danger of displaying temper. He smiled loftily.

"There's not much to learn in a ship's engines," he said. "I know about all there is to know already. But I shall stick to cars. The sea wouldn't do for me; I'm fond of home."

"But—but you might get married some day," objected the girl.

"Well?" said the other, staring.

"And then it would be much nicer for everybody if you went to sea. I'm sure your wife would like it better."

Mr. Biggs had another inward struggle, and the issue was still undecided when Albert, appearing at the door of the smoke-room, came slowly forward and sat down on the deck a couple of yards from them. The chauffeur glared at him in disgust, and a smothered exclamation broke from him as the boy drew a mouth-organ from his pocket and gave it a preparatory wipe on his sleeve.

"Run away," growled Biggs.

Albert shook his head. "I've as much right to be here as what you have," he said. "I've put the things straight in the smoke-room, and Mr. Markham said I could come out and amuse myself. What piece would you like?"

He put the instrument to his lips, and the strains of "A Life on the Ocean Wave" floated over the placid sea. His eyes were half-closed with the ecstasy of the artist, but nevertheless he kept a shrewd watch on the movements of the palpitating Mr. Biggs.

"Now you run off," repeated Mr. Biggs, in a grim voice, when the boy had finished. "Run off, before you get hurt."

"It don't hurt me," said Albert simply. "It does me good. Dr. Maloney says that playing wind instruments is good for the lungs. He told me so yesterday."

He raised the mouth-organ again and played "Home, Sweet Home" with variations and much feeling.

"Why don't you go to the other end of the ship?" growled the infuriated chauffeur.

"'Cos I like this end," said Albert, finishing a passage. "Why don't you go?"

Mr. Biggs looked at Miss Mudge, but that lady made no sign. Then, turning his head, he saw the butler standing in the doorway of the smoke-room. His hands were folded in front of him and a seraphic smile played over his features as he stood gazing over the everlasting sea.

CHAPTER XV

EXCEPT for an occasion on which Miss Mudge was lost at Colombo and was brought back to the ship by three Cingalese gentlemen in striped petticoats with their hair done up in a bun, the voyage progressed without incident. Between ports nothing happened to break the monotony of the days, and, in these circumstances, even the youngest and fairest began to attach an importance to meal-times that was totally lacking on shore. Some of the older members began to put on flesh, and Mr. Pope, confronted by the twin evils of corpulence and a liver that clamoured for attention, laid his case before the doctor.

"No good coming to me," said Maloney brusquely; "you ought to see a magistrate."

"Magistrate? What for?" demanded the other, staring.

"Six months' hard labour," replied the doctor. "I've seen your kind before. What you want me to do is to give you something in a bottle that will work miracles; an antidote for four heavy meals

a day and strong cigars in between. How many old brandies did you have after dinner last night?"

"Two," said Pope slowly. "There's no need to look like that; you had three."

"Absence of mind," declared the doctor. "I was thinking out a problem in medical science. It might just as well have been water; I shouldn't have known."

"You work out problems every night, then," said Pope, "and I've never seen you take water with them yet. It's a bad example for a doctor to set; naturally other people think it is right to do what he does."

"It's wasting good breath on you to argue," said Maloney, "and it's wasting the best possible medical skill to try and treat you."

"I'm going to be treated all the same, though," declared Pope, breathing hard.

Maloney shrugged his shoulders. "All right; come along, then," he said cheerfully. "I'll mix you up a little bottle."

"Will it do me any good?" inquired the patient.

"Not the least in the world," was the reply. "It's merely to put your mind at ease. Fortified with the mixture (two table-spoonfuls three times a day), you will indulge more than ever."

"But I want to be treated properly," protested Pope. "I want to get well."

"Will you put yourself into my hands?" demanded the doctor.

Pope eyed him uneasily. "Of course," he said at last, "with——

"No 'withs,'" said the other sternly, "and no mental reservations. It's a bad case, a case that most men would jib at, but if you promise to do exactly as I tell you I'll undertake it."

"I've always understood that any sudden change——" began Pope.

The doctor turned to Knight, who had just come up with Talwyn and Tollhurst. "He's going to teach me my business now," he said despairingly.

"All right," said Pope gruffly, "do as you like."

"You hear," said Maloney, turning to the audience. "My patient has placed himself unreservedly in my hands. Two months' treatment, and he will be a convert to the simple life. His taste for alcohol, tobacco, and strong meats will be entirely eradicated, and the dinner-bell will serve merely to remind him of past errors."

Mr. Pope began his treatment the same day, and dined simply and healthfully off a pint of hot water. Conversation in his immediate neighbourhood languished, and it was a relief to all when he arose

and, with unpleasant emphasis, announced his intention of going on deck for a mouthful of fresh air.

Conditions were relaxed next day. He breakfasted off dry toast, lunched off biscuits, and for dinner was allowed both, his sole reward consisting in the praise accorded to his strength of mind; praise chorused by his friends between savoury mouthfuls and brimming beakers.

Diet and exercise were the two principal remedies in the doctor's medicine chest, and in arranging the latter to suit Mr. Pope's wishes a little inconvenience was occasioned to others. The patient naturally objected to performing skipping and other exercises before an audience of candid, and in some cases outspoken, friends, and in these circumstances the doctor agreed to get up and superintend them at six in the morning.

"Everybody will be asleep at that time," he said encouragingly, "except the crew, and they'll be too busy washing decks to bother about you."

Mr. Pope raised another objection.

"Cold water won't hurt you," said the doctor, "and for the lying down turn you can have a rug. There's one beautiful exercise where you lie on your back and describe circles with your legs. It's the one Adonis used to do."

Mr. Pope made a few remarks about Adonis which were mercifully carried away by the wind and sterilised by the ocean.

"If you rise at six and do your exercises," said the doctor, regarding him steadfastly, "you shall have a slice of lean meat with your lunch; if you do them well you shall have another slice for dinner."

Whether it was the promised reward or mere strength of mind, the patient quitted his bunk next morning at six o'clock, and in bare feet and purple pyjamas followed Maloney to the deck.

"A gentle walk round first," said the doctor; "the wet is good for your feet."

They took a dozen turns and then, at his command, broke into a double. The officer on the bridge leaned over to watch them.

"Now for the exercises," said the doctor, after four rounds. "Where's that rug?"

He spread it on the deck behind the drawing-room and, lying on his back with his legs close together, raised them slowly and described circles in the air. Pope, still panting from his exertions, stood by watching coldly.

"Now you try," said Maloney, springing up. "Flat on your back and your legs extended to begin with."

"I've got a touch of lumbago this morning," growled the patient.

"It's a cure for lumbago," was the reply. "Down you go."

Mr. Pope got down and, the doctor having pressed his shoulders to the rug and walked all round, peering at him from different angles, commenced his instructions.

"At the word 'One,' " he said slowly, "raise both feet from the deck. O-one! There's no need for you to raise your head to look at them. Nobody wants to steal them. Now, begin again: 'O-one!' There's nothing to giggle at!"

"I'm not giggling," said Pope indignantly.

"You were making some fizzy noise," said his instructor. "Keep your mouth shut and breathe through your nose. Now."

Mr. Pope had completed three circles, and was half-way through the fourth, when the sound of a faint agonised moan brought his feet down and his head round with great swiftness. The form of Miss Blake disappeared around the corner of the drawing-room as though withdrawn by some powerful but invisible agency. Stifled sounds issued from within.

"Don't take any notice of them," counselled the

doctor, as Pope, very red of face, scrambled to his feet.

"It was the pup-pup-pup-purple pies that upset me," wailed the voice of Miss Blake. "Didn't he—look—a dream! And his little pink to-to-toes waving in the air! Oh! Oh!! Oh!!!"

Judging by the inflection of the voices within, the sufferer was getting but scant sympathy. Maloney put his head in at the door and saw Knight and Peplow, with Miss Seacombe, gazing disdainfully at Miss Blake, whose face was buried in a sofa cushion.

"And what's the meaning of it all?" demanded the doctor. "And why are you all up at this time?"

"Well, if you come to that, why are you up?" retorted Knight.

"Duty," said the other. "I'm looking after my patient's interests. He has now retreated to his cabin; and the exercises only just begun!"

"Well, let him do 'em in his cabin in future," said Knight. "We don't want purple acrobats first thing in the morning. It's a disturbing influence."

Maloney shook his head. "He's going to do 'em on deck in the fresh air," he said firmly. "You'll have to get up later."

"We were here first," said Knight.

"Early Rising Brigade," explained Peplow, nodding.

"Been established for weeks," added Knight.

Maloney grinned. "Why didn't you tell me?" he inquired.

"Because the number is limited to four," said Knight, as Miss Seacombe, with a slight elevation of her head, passed out, followed by Miss Blake. "You get your man up at five and let him get his contortions over before we appear, there's a good chap."

Maloney shook his head. "If you'd heard him when I mentioned six o'clock you wouldn't ask it," he replied.

"Very well, we'll keep to the other end of the deck," said Knight restlessly. "What is more, we will stay in the smoke-room."

"I'll put it to him," said the doctor doubtfully. "I want to do all I can for you young people, but of course my patients stand first. Pope is an interesting case—a sort of overgrown rose-bush I'm going to prune down."

"I expect he is waiting for you—and the pruning knife," said Knight. "Don't let us keep you. Duty first."

"Four's company," assented Maloney, with a nod; "five is—good company."

"I wish you'd get your rose-bush to do his exercises after we are all in bed," said Knight, buttonholing him as he turned to go. "If the other people get to hear of them they'll be getting up early too."

"We must take the risk," said the other blandly. "Good thing for them if they do, but I don't think they'd make a practice of it. Once would be enough."

The news, as Knight had foreseen, soon leaked out. For once Miss Mudge found the boatswain's conversation interesting, his description of Mr. Pope's skipping in particular being so well received that he began to entertain a high opinion of his powers as a *raconteur*.

"You ought to see 'im; you'd burst," he said tenderly.

Miss Mudge received the suggestion coldly.

"Or else 'ave a fit," urged Mr. Tarn, eying her hopefully.

"It wouldn't amuse me," said the girl in a superior voice. "And I hope I'm too much of a lady to get up at six in the morning to look at any gentleman that ever was born, especially (she shivered slightly) when he is not dressed to receive visitors."

"I don't see no 'arm in it," said the disappointed boatswain. "Now suppose, for the sake of argy-

ment, it was you instead o' Mr. Pope, why every man Jack of us would——"

He broke off suddenly as Miss Mudge, closing her book with a bang, gathered up her work and stalked off with her head in the air. He returned with a sigh to his duty of finding fault with men who had neglected theirs.

It is sad to relate that Lady Penrose displayed less refinement in the matter than her maid. Indeed, Miss Mudge had no sooner informed her, with all due respect, of Mr. Pope's early morning exercises than she was formulating plans for witnessing them.

"Easiest thing in the world," said Carstairs, to whom she confided her desire. "Get up at ten to six to-morrow morning, and lie in wait for him in the smoke-room or somewhere. I'll get up too if I may."

"Do you think he would mind?" inquired Lady Penrose, with somewhat belated consideration.

"Why should he?" said Carstairs. "Besides, he won't know. We shall have the smoke-room all to ourselves at that hour, and not a soul will be any the wiser."

They had the smoke-room to themselves next morning for exactly two minutes, at the end of which time the door opened and admitted Miss

Blake. A startled "Oh!" sufficiently expressed her opinion of the situation. Knight and Peplow, who followed with Miss Seacombe, maintained a discreet silence.

A faint shadow flitted across the face of Lady Penrose. "Dear me," she said, recovering with a little laugh, "you are up early!"

"Healthy," said Knight briefly.

"How interesting!" murmured Lady Penrose. "Have you been taking this prescription for long?"

"Not very," said Knight suavely. "Not longer than you and Carstairs will, I hope."

"We came here to see Mr. Pope," said Lady Penrose.

Knight bowed. "We came on the same errand —four of us," he added somewhat pointedly. "Pope—who is a sensitive plant—usually performs aft."

In the somewhat constrained silence that followed an odd pattering noise was heard outside, and, before anybody could close the door, Pope, who was doing a sort of frog exercise with bent knees and knuckles on the deck, passed in a bound. Maloney, who was following up behind, put his head in at the door and glared at them.

"Is it a mothers' meeting or what?" he inquired indignantly. "How do you think my patient is to

preserve his equilibrium when he is exposed to this sort of thing?"

"Perhaps he didn't see us," suggested Peplow.

"He did," said the doctor heatedly. "He has now disappeared below, and I would not like to repeat the language he is using. How is a medical man to do himself justice when he is interfered with like this?"

"Do you think that this ship is reserved for you and your precious patient?" demanded Miss Seacombe with some heat.

"That we are to stay in bed until you tell us to get up?" added Miss Blake.

"Perhaps you'd like to lock us in our cabins?" suggested Mr. Peplow.

"Not you," said the doctor significantly. "I should like to give you the same treatment that I'm giving Pope. Do you a lot of good."

"Same treatment as Pope? What for?" demanded the startled Mr. Peplow.

"Anybody'll tell you," said the doctor darkly as he withdrew.

"What does he mean?" inquired Mr. Peplow, looking around. "I'm perfectly healthy. I take all the exercise I can get. I've been up at six every morning for the last six——"

"Six?" prompted Lady Penrose gently.

"Hours," continued Mr. Peplow, a trifle confused by the ferocity of Mr. Knight's glance.

"I'm sure you have done all you can do," said Lady Penrose in a sympathetic voice. "I had no idea you were so energetic. You make me thoroughly ashamed of my laziness. I must try and follow your example."

"If it's to see my patient—my late patient—you want to get up early," said Maloney, appearing again, "you can give up the idea."

"Late patient!" repeated Carstairs, with a start.

The doctor nodded. "He is in the steward's pantry," he said gloomily. "Markham has taken the case out of my hands, and is treating it with slices of cold ham."

CHAPTER XVI

"SO far so good," said Lady Penrose, with a half-sigh. "It really seems that we are going to sail round the world without meeting a single adventure."

"Do you want one?" inquired Carstairs.

"A little one, perhaps," was the reply. "Just a little thrill of some sort; something a little out of the common of everyday life. A shipwrecked crew to rescue, or something of that sort. Fancy being out in a little boat in this darkness alone with the stars and the water!"

"Deprived of food and drink, and Pope's version of the 'Bay of Biscay,'" said Carstairs, as heroic bellowings and the tinkle of a piano sounded from the drawing-room.

"He is quite himself again now," said Lady Penrose. "He says that he dismissed his doctor just in time."

"Awkward if he has to call him in again," said Carstairs, with a smile. "Maloney warns him that purgatory would be easy compared with his next

course of treatment. I'm afraid he has an idea that some of us are too self-indulgent. Yesterday he accused Knight of being too soft, and they had a turn with the gloves before breakfast this morning to settle it."

"I heard of it," said Lady Penrose dryly. "Mr. Knight does most useless things well."

"Maloney would agree with you about the boxing, at any rate," replied Carstairs. "He is still sore about it, but what hurt him more than anything was that, after giving him a thorough dusting, Knight admitted the charge of softness and asked for a tonic."

His companion gave a faint laugh. "It might have done Mr. Knight a little good to be defeated," she remarked.

Carstairs nodded. "One or two other altruists took the same view," he said slowly. "They brought up one of the firemen, who rather fancies himself in that line, and the result is that they are a man short in the stoke-hole to-day. The skipper complained to me about it. He seemed most annoyed because he hadn't been called up to see it. 'Stop it,' he said, but I knew what he meant."

"You men are all alike," said Lady Penrose, shrugging her shoulders. "It is horrible."

"Shocking," said Carstairs; "but I agree with

you that it might do Knight good to meet his master at the game. Whom could we find?"

Lady Penrose leaned back, considering. "Captain Tollhurst," she suggested at last.

"Tollhurst!" exclaimed Carstairs, with surprise. "Do you really think he could stand up to Knight?"

"No," was the reply.

"Well, then——"

"Might do Captain Tollhurst good," said Lady Penrose, maintaining her gravity by an effort.

Carstairs eyes twinkled safely in the darkness. "You want to do good to so many people," he murmured. "The saintly side of your character is uppermost to-night."

"How dull for you!" said Lady Penrose. "I'm so sorry. Is Mr. Pope really going to sing 'Tom Bowling'?" she added, as the opening chorus of the piano and a modest cough were heard.

"I'm afraid so," said Carstairs.

They sat almost in silence until the song was finished, two remarks of his being first suspended and then entirely lost owing to the interest occasioned by the efforts of the vocalist to reach his top-note.

"Pity he never married," said Lady Penrose as the song ended amid general applause; "a good wife would burn the piano if she couldn't stop him

any other way. I believe men remain single to avoid criticism."

"There are other reasons," said Carstairs musingly. "You haven't considered man's shyness and his general sense of unworthiness. If it's a genuine case he usually puts his idol on a pedestal; she can't climb down for fear of making a false step, and he is afraid to reach up to help her."

"But if they do happen to marry," inquired Lady Penrose, "what becomes of the pedestal?"

"They put the first-born on it," replied Carstairs. "He generally wears it out."

"You must have devoted a lot of time to the subject," remarked Lady Penrose. "I believe you are the sort of man that would build an Eiffel Tower for the lady. You would end by making her giddy."

"How easy it is to be misunderstood," sighed Carstairs. "As a matter of fact, the methods of certain savage races I have read about appeal to me much more strongly. They give the adored one a tap over the head with a club and the thing is done."

"Other men, other manners," said Lady Penrose, "but it comes to much the same thing in the end. I have no doubt that the maidens of the tribe make

the clubs. You ought to go out there, Mr. Carstairs. I am sure the output would go up."

Carstairs hesitated. "If you think that," he said at last, "I will remain here."

A dark figure stepped out of the lighted doorway and came towards them.

"Coming out of the light, I can hardly see where I am," said Tollhurst, dropping into a chair next to Lady Penrose. "What a peaceful night!"

"It doesn't suit Lady Penrose," said Carstairs; "she has been sighing for adventure."

The captain laughed gently. "Better without them," he returned. "What could be better than this? And, after all, things are always possible at sea. There is always a chance of running into a submerged wreck. I have had that experience once, and I can assure you I don't want it again. Or fire; think of a fire at sea, and putting off in small boats hundreds of miles from the nearest land!"

"Have you had that experience, too?" inquired Lady Penrose.

The captain wrestled fiercely with the temptation. "No," he said at last; and, in view of his questioner's comments, felt sure that he had chosen the better part.

"I had an alarm of fire once," he said, breaking a somewhat prolonged silence. "Ten years ago

in an old barque bound for Archangel. Nasty while it lasted, but we got it under in three or four hours."

"Interesting life," murmured Lady Penrose. "You ought to write a book, Captain Tollhurst."

The captain laughed his gentle laugh again. "No good," he said, shaking his head. "I couldn't write a line. Fellows who write the best books are the fellows who have never seen anything."

"I think you could write a splendid book," declared Lady Penrose with warmth.

"Awfully good of you," said the unconscious captain. "Wish I could. Should ask permission to dedicate it to you."

Lady Penrose murmured her acknowledgments.

"Happenings in books are well enough," said Carstairs; "that is where I prefer to enjoy mine."

"Every man to his trade," said the captain indulgently. "It is just a matter of use. I have been knocking about since my boyhood. Soon after I left the Army I was big-game hunting in Africa, and I didn't speak to a white man for nine months."

"Poor things!" said Lady Penrose. "I mean the animals you killed in that time," she added, as the captain moved uneasily. "You must have accounted for a lot."

"I didn't miss many," said the captain, lighting

a cigarette. He leaned back in his chair and, becoming reminiscent, related a few of the more exciting episodes. Lightly and easily he skipped from peril to peril, until at last Lady Penrose, with a sharp intake of breath that might have been misunderstood for sympathy, rose suddenly and bade her companions "good night."

"I'm afraid perhaps I was a little bit too realistic," said Tollhurst, as she disappeared below. "Well, I'm off too. Good night."

Carstairs nodded and, lighting another cigarette, sat for some time in thought. His guests came out of the drawing-room in twos and threes and, after loitering in little groups, dispersed to bed. Knight and Peplow, after leaning against the side opposite him for some time, crossed over and took the two empty chairs.

"Nothing on his conscience," remarked Knight presently; "quite unperturbed."

"Quite," said Peplow dutifully.

"He seems to be asleep," said Knight, after waiting for some time. "He inveigles us on to this beastly little ship of his and then shuts his eyes to things."

"Perhaps he *is* asleep," remarked the useful Mr. Peplow.

"Sleepy," said Carstairs, with a yawn; "but don't

mind me, just go on with your little chat. I am going to turn in soon."

"Not till we've done with you," said Knight. "We consider that we were lured on to this plutocratic craft under false pretences, and we want to know what you are going to do about it. When we accepted your invitation we thought that there would be a certain amount of 'sitting-out,' so to speak, and instead of that it's like living in the midst of a public meeting."

"We could leave you behind at Melbourne," suggested Carstairs.

"You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick," said Knight; "*we* don't want to be left behind, but if you could arrange to leave some of the others it would be just the thing. It only wants a little thinking out."

"I'll go and think it over now," said Carstairs, rising. "I can think better in bed. Good night."

"We haven't finished yet," said Knight. "Freddie has got a lot to say. Go on, Freddie; tell him how we agreed to do all in our power to help *him*."

"Help me!" repeated Carstairs, with a slight laugh. "What are you talking about?"

"You know," said Knight significantly. "He knows, doesn't he, Freddie?"

Mr. Peplow swallowed. "Yes," he replied. "So—so——"

"Yes?" said Carstairs, after a pause.

"So does everybody else," finished Mr. Peplow, with an effort.

"And you have our full consent and blessing," added Knight. "In fact, we think it might be a good thing for both of us; anyway, things couldn't be much worse."

"I haven't the least idea what you are talking about," said Carstairs somewhat stiffly.

"That's all right, then," said Knight; "but, if you really want to know, ask Miss Flack, or Mrs. Jardine, or Talwyn, or—— Not now," he added, as Carstairs walked away; "they're all in bed."

"Stuffy!" said Peplow sagely as Carstairs vanished.

"So am I," said his friend. "Come along. Let's have a walk up and down; for once we are alone. Why! Halloa, Biggs!"

"Good evening, sir," said Biggs. "I just come for'ard for a blow before turning in."

"And I am just going to have a whiskey and soda before doing the same. It's you that ought to have it, really—after that hot engine-room."

"Thank you, sir," said the chauffeur. "If there

isn't enough to go round, I shall watch you drink it with pleasure."

They entered the smoke-room just as Markham was having a final look round. At a word from Knight he busied himself with the whiskey and a siphon.

"Turned a bit pale, hasn't it?" murmured Mr. Biggs, as he took the glass from his old enemy; "but perhaps it is the motion of the ship."

"Colour it yourself," said Knight. "I suppose it's in order to give you a drink," he added, as the chauffeur complied. "I mean, the skipper wouldn't object."

"Just what I was wondering, sir," said Mr. Biggs cheerfully. "I expect he would; it seems to me it's what skippers are for—to object to things. But even an admiral couldn't help himself now. It's gone."

He said good night, and with a wink at the butler, which elicited only an icy stare in response, went off to his quarters.

Mr. Peplow's gloom, never of a very lasting nature, passed with the night. Any lingering trace was dispelled by the fresh morning air, with its appetising blend of grilled bacon and coffee, and the news that Mrs. Jardine was confined to her cabin with one of her traditional headaches—a headache that had been

in the family for generations, and was rumoured to have been a source of considerable trouble to the Plantagenets.

He sat in the smoke-room after lunch with a cigarette and a book, until the former expired from lack of attention and the latter sustained injuries to its back from a sudden fall. He opened his eyes at last to see the laughing face of Miss Blake framed in the doorway.

"I was just going to fetch Miss Flack," she remarked; "the poor thing wants gloves badly. She was talking about it yesterday."

"I wasn't asleep," said Mr. Peplow. "Where is she?"

"Playing bridge," was the reply. "Isabel is sitting with aunt, and, as nearly everybody else is playing cards, I thought I'd come and talk to you. Still, if you'd rather sleep——"

"Sleep!" exclaimed the other, in a deep voice. "Have you realised that I've not had a word alone with you for weeks?"

"Really?" said the girl carelessly. "I hadn't noticed it."

"When it isn't Mrs. Jardine, it's Miss Flack," continued Mr. Peplow, "and when they snatch a few brief moments from duty Talwyn mounts guard."

"What are you talking about?" inquired Miss Blake.

"Never mind," said Mr. Peplow. "It's no good wasting time grousing. Let us improve the shining hours."

"How?"

"Let us talk," said Peplow tenderly.

"That *will* be improving," said the girl.

"That's right," said Peplow gloomily, "make fun of me. When you smiled so nicely at me just now——"

"I?" said Miss Blake. "Smiled? I was laughing at you. You've no idea how funny you looked. Your mouth was open, and you were snoring like a baby with the snuffles."

Mr. Peplow stiffened in his chair. "I'm sorry I woke up as I was affording you so much amusement," he said with dignity.

"So am I," said Miss Blake, with a sudden change of manner. "However, I won't disturb you," and she went off with her head at an angle.

"She's gone," murmured the amazed Peplow. "She's actually gone. Well!"

He went outside and, finding the deck deserted, threw himself into a lounge-chair and sat scowling at the universe. The skipper, passing on his way to the chart-room, pulled up and smiled affably.

"Couldn't improve on the weather," he remarked, crumpling his fringe of grey beard in his fist.

Mr. Peplow assented without enthusiasm.

"Where are we for next?" he inquired.

"Australian ports," replied Captain Vobster, "New Zealand; call in at some of the South Sea Islands, and then home."

Mr. Peplow sighed. "The islands ought to be interesting," he remarked. "Pick out a nice little one, cap'n, with nobody else on it, and leave me there. I'm going to turn beach-comber. I retire from the world."

"Very nice life too," said the accommodating skipper, "for a single man; married ones too, sometimes. I knew one man that did it. Ran away from his wife to punish her, and after twenty years of it found that she had come in for a fortune soon after he disappeared and married again. Time he got back found they'd run through it all. Spoilt his life for him, poor chap."

Mr. Peplow said "Oh!" and turned with a beaming and forgiving smile to Miss Blake as she came quietly up to them.

"Though I've known some people take to the beach and get tired of it in a week," continued the skipper.

Mr. Peplow, who was gazing ardently at Miss Blake, said "Ah!"

"Some of 'em get melancholy," explained the skipper.

"Really," said Miss Blake, as she took a chair next to Peplow.

"Suicidal almost."

There was a somewhat constrained silence as his audience, with their hands folded, sat staring straight in front of them.

"It's the loneliness," said the skipper, who felt that he was making an impression.

"H'm!" said both.

"A man has time to sit and think."

"H'm!"

Captain Vobster paused. There was a feeling in the atmosphere for which he was utterly unable to account, and he stood scratching the side of his nose, possessed with a horrible idea that he had said something wrong. He glanced at them in perplexity, and then, suddenly clapping his hand over his mouth, went off with his eyes dancing. Slight sounds escaped on his way to the chart-room.

"What an ill-bred man!" exclaimed Miss Blake, gazing after him.

"Shocking," agreed the other.

"I—I am not going to remain here to be laughed at," continued the girl. "The idea!"

"He wasn't laughing at you," said Peplow hastily, "and he has gone now. How wonderfully well you are looking! What was old Talwyn talking to you about at lunch?"

"Different things," replied the girl. "Don't stare like that; it's rude."

"I'm not staring," said Mr. Peplow ardently. "I'm worshipping."

"Well, it's not nice," said Miss Blake, who had an uneasy feeling that she had come back too easily. "It's just the way you eyed the beef at lunch."

"Eyed the beef?" repeated the choking Mr. Peplow. "Do you think I care what I eat?"

"Of course you do," said Miss Blake. "Everybody notices it. You have got an excellent appetite, and I am only talking to you for your good. If you are not careful you'll get quite chubby."

"That'll do," said Mr. Peplow thickly.

"Do!" exclaimed the incensed Miss Blake, springing to her feet. *"Do!* How dare you talk to me like that? What do you mean by it?"

She stood looking at him as a blackbird might look at a worm that had tried to bite it. Then, with an indignant exclamation, she went off.

Mr. Peplow made no effort to detain her. A

picture of indignant misery, he sat lumpishly in his chair, scowling darkly at the deck.

"Halloa!" said Carstairs, coming out of the drawing-room. "All alone?"

"I like being alone," said Mr. Peplow, in a deep voice.

"Do you, though," said Carstairs, eying him with some interest.

"I don't wish to be bothered with people," continued Mr. Peplow. "Let them go their way and I'll go mine."

"Poor—old—man!" said Carstairs, smiling. "I know what's the matter with you."

"Oh!" said Mr. Peplow offensively.

Carstairs nodded. "Indigestion."

"Eh!" shouted Peplow, starting up as though he had been stung. "Look here, Carstairs, I don't know what you mean, but I've had enough of it. It's a vile conspiracy. It's—it's an infernal plant."

"What on earth's the matter?" inquired the marvelling Carstairs.

"You—you've been talking to Miss Blake," cried Peplow, trembling with rage.

"Well, so do you when you get the chance," said Carstairs, in a soothing voice. "You don't want to monopolise the poor girl entirely, do you? Why shouldn't I speak to her? And I talk to her about

you, my boy. Only yesterday I was saying how fat and well you——"

He drew back suddenly as Mr. Peplow, with an inarticulate yell, sprang to his feet and stood mouthing at him. For some time the young man stood struggling in vain for speech; then he turned with a wild gesture and stamped his way below.

CHAPTER XVII

MISS FLACK in a moment of enthusiasm said that the voyage was like a long railway journey, with delightful ports instead of stations. She averred that she had learnt more geography in a few months than in all the years spent at school; and only a week after leaving Auckland spoke warmly of the beautiful Sydney harbour at Melbourne.

In Polynesia she forsook geography for art, the beauty of Tahiti affecting her so strongly that she sought to express her emotions in verse. To the sympathetic Carstairs, who caught her in the act of tearing up paper and dropping the pieces overboard, she confessed that the subject was too great for her, and that she would have to rely upon memory and the inspiration of the moment when she wished to do justice to it. Her enthusiasm was shared by the others, and the *Starlight* by general request continued to cruise among the islands. Monarchs and their dusky followers were received on board, and Albert thrilled pleasantly when he saw the firearms provided for their entertainment in case of need.

"Not much chance of unpleasantness," explained Captain Vobster to Pope, "but, if there is any, my idea is always to be more unpleasant than the other fellow."

"Very good plan, too," said Pope approvingly.

To Albert's secret disappointment, however, the skipper's precautions proved unnecessary. Good-fellowship and fair dealing were the order of the day, and the decks of the yacht were almost smothered at times in gifts. Fruit, vegetables, chickens, and pigs were supplied in abundance; the night Pope found five little pigs, decorated with pink ribbons, tied up in his bed being a memorable one in the annals of the voyage. The crowd that stood outside awaiting events fled in disorder at his appearance, and seeking sanctuary behind locked cabin doors earnestly assured him that it was not the animals' fault, and that nothing was further from their wishes than to have him for a bed-fellow.

"Pope was quite crusty about it," said Knight, recounting the affair next day to Miss Seacombe. "He hasn't quite got over it yet."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourselves," said the girl.

"We are," said Knight. "But never mind about old Pope and his troubles. It is delightful to get

you by yourself for five minutes. Quite like old times."

"I like company," said Miss Seacombe thoughtfully.

"You've got what you like, then, on board this blessed ship," retorted Mr. Knight, with some heat.

"I suppose," said the girl dreamily, "I suppose if Mr. Maloney were holding my hand the man on the bridge would think he was feeling my pulse."

"Con-found the man on the bridge!" said Knight, dropping her hand hastily. "That's what I complain about; you can never get away from people here. How delightful it would be if we were the only two on board!"

"A bit dull," said Miss Seacombe.

"Dull!" exclaimed Knight sharply. "Dull!"

"For you," said the girl peaceably.

"Where's that brigand on the bridge got to?" inquired Knight, groping for her hand.

"Half in the wheel-house, but he will be out again in a minute or two. I expect he only went in there to laugh. It must seem rather funny to an onlooker."

"He had better not let me see him being funny," growled Knight.

"Poor thing," said Miss Seacombe softly. "Diddums, then!"

"And do try and be serious," said Knight sternly. "What about running off and getting married? When we get ashore, I mean, of course," he added, as the girl waved towards the sea.

"No good," she said seriously; "bread and cheese, and—and—the usual concomitants are all very well in theory, in practice you would find the diet rather monotonous."

Knight sat considering. "I believe if we were once married and she couldn't help herself, Lady Penrose would come round," he said slowly. "Wonder what it is she sees in me to object to?"

"It is strange, isn't it?" said the girl. "I think, for one thing, she has an idea that you are a slacker. She has got no patience with men who don't work, you know. Then I don't think she likes your manner much. Some people don't."

"What's it got to do with her?" demanded the indignant Knight. "You like it?"

Miss Seacombe nodded. "It's your only charm," she murmured.

"Besides, I'm going to work," continued Knight. "I've been thinking a lot about it lately. Difficulty is to find something suitable. Can't you suggest something? I could drop it as soon as we were married."

He glanced hopefully at his companion, until it

became evident that he had given her a problem which was in no immediate danger of being solved. After a long silence he came to her assistance.

"What about the stage?" he inquired.

"Or grand opera?" said the girl demurely. "You only seem to think of the agreeable things, you know. You want to be paid for amusing yourself. As Isabel says——"

"I don't want to know what Isabel says," remarked Knight grimly. "The whole fact of the matter is, she has got too much time on her hands. Why doesn't *she* work, if she's so fond of it? Or why doesn't she meet some tame, undiscriminating male and marry him? I'm sure that either Carstairs or Tollhurst——"

"She hates Captain Tollhurst," interrupted Miss Seacombe. "He simply haunts her, and when she is rude to him he seems to regard it as a delicate little attention on her part. He is so pleased with himself that nothing upsets him; he only smiles. It must be very nice to be like that."

"His devotion has not passed unnoticed," said Knight dryly. "It has afforded me a great deal of innocent pleasure. In the hope that Lady Penrose will imitate my delicacy I always avoid intruding upon them when possible. I am sure she has noticed it."

"It's the sort of thing you would do," said the girl restlessly, "and then you wonder why Isabel objects to you."

Mr. Knight started, and admitting, after due consideration, that perhaps his behaviour could be improved, set himself to the task with such characteristic energy that his friends were somewhat perturbed in consequence. One or two of them attributed the change to failing health, others (the majority) suspected mischief, Pope on two occasions getting up from the meal-table to make sure that his cabin door was locked.

A series of violent squalls and rainstorms helped to relieve the monotony of life at sea, and a fresh interest was imparted by the knowledge that Captain Vobster was understood to be making for an uninhabited island.

"Uninhabited when last visited," he said guardedly.

Visions of a picnic on a scale hitherto undreamt of took possession of all on board. The sailmaker was set to work to make a couple of tents; and the form of picnic to be enjoyed became the subject of a somewhat heated debate. The company was almost equally divided into "Thermos Flasks" and "Robinson Crusoes," the former voting for comfort and the latter—consisting chiefly of the younger

members—preferring to gather their sustenance at first hand from the land and the sea and sleep in houses of their own erecting. In the final division it had to be pointed out to Mr. Peplow, torn between love and self-interest, that he could not vote on both sides.

"It really ought to be a delightful experience," said Lady Penrose, as she sat one morning discussing the subject with Carstairs. "There is something very delightful in the idea of getting back to Nature."

Carstairs coughed. "With the resources of civilisation at hand, yes," he replied. "Anyway, I expect we shall all be glad of a run ashore. I'm afraid you find things a little bit dull sometimes on board ship."

His companion shook her head. "No," she said slowly; "but a little more excitement perhaps would not come amiss. Nothing seems to happen at sea; no post, no newspapers, no scandal."

"H'm! We might have managed that," said Carstairs, in tones of self-reproach. "I'll speak to Pope about it. I believe the whole fact of the matter is you are still suffering from a most unfeminine thirst for adventure. Suppose we go up to the Solomons; the skipper has got some gruesome stories about them."

"Adventure without risk," said Lady Penrose

firmly. "I have got no use for the other kind. The sea-stories I used to read in my youth were full of incident; in real life nothing seems to happen. As a matter of fact, I don't really want an adventure for myself; I want one for Captain Tollhurst."

"Altruist," murmured Carstairs.

"Anything but that," said Lady Penrose; "but if I have to listen to any more of his deeds of derring-do I shall address the crew, storm the saloon, and put him in irons."

"Mutiny!" said Carstairs, with a smile.

"Call it what you like," was the reply, "but it does seem hard that with a hero like that on board there should be no opportunity for a display of his powers. It isn't fair to him, you know."

Carstairs smiled again, and Lady Penrose, with a side glance at him, clasped her hands and sat thinking. She took another glance at him and their eyes met. Hers were soft and seemed unusually large. He observed them with interest.

"I was going to ask a favour of you," she said, at last, with a little laugh, "but you have been so kind that I won't. It's presuming on good-nature."

"Please," said Carstairs earnestly.

His companion shook her head with an imitation of determination that he mistook for the real thing. He became insistent.

"You wouldn't agree," she said, at last, after many arguments.

"Anything that is possible," said Carstairs with emphasis.

"It is such a great favour," she murmured, "and I ought not to ask it."

"The bigger the better," said Carstairs stoutly. "Now, what is it?"

Lady Penrose hesitated and looked away. "Better leave it alone," she said, turning to him again, with a smile. "Why do you tempt me?"

"What is it?" he repeated.

"Do you pass your word to grant it?" she inquired.

"Certainly, provided it is nothing impossible," said Carstairs.

"Oh, how good you are!" she said, with a disturbing smile. "Mind, you have passed your word!"

Carstairs, vaguely uneasy, nodded. "I am quite sure that Lady Penrose would ask nothing that—that——" he began.

Lady Penrose laughed. "Oh, ho, wouldn't she?" she retorted. "That's why she got your promise first. You know, if there's one thing I feel certain of about you it is that you would never in any circumstances break your word. I am sure that you

would go to the stake first. However unpleasant——"

"Suppose we stop this unwholesome flattery and get to business," interrupted the paragon.

Lady Penrose nodded. "Very well," she said briskly. "I want the head of Captain Tollhurst on a charger."

"Oh!" said Carstairs, relieved. "Oh, is that all? What a fuss to make about a little thing like that! I have no doubt Tollhurst will be delighted."

"His feelings don't matter. Now, you have passed your word, you know; there is no escape for you. I want—a mutiny."

"What, as well as Tollhurst's head?" inquired her astonished host.

"Same thing," said Lady Penrose. "Captain Tollhurst will lose his head when it happens and the thing is done. He will never hold it up again."

Carstairs became grave. "You are not serious," he protested.

"Never more so in my life," said Lady Penrose cheerfully.

"I know better," said Carstairs stoutly. "You are far too kind and good-natured and thoughtful for others, and——"

"Suppose we stop this unwholesome flattery and get to business," quoted the other, smiling.

"And you mustn't forget that Tollhurst is my guest," concluded Carstairs gravely.

"And you mustn't forget that you promised me," said Lady Penrose. "Oh, I can see myself clinging to his arm and begging him to save me. Like this, you know!"

She clung lightly to Carstairs' arm and gazed at him appealingly.

"Well, he would if you looked at him like that," he said, with a laugh, as she released his arm. "He couldn't help himself. And suppose he takes the thing seriously and kills somebody? Besides, think how frightened the ladies would be. It is impossible."

"I will arrange for the ladies," said Lady Penrose dryly.

"It isn't fair to Tollhurst," said Carstairs, shaking his head obstinately. "It can't be done."

"Why not? It gives him the opportunity of his life. Think what a magnificent chance it gives him of displaying his courage. You don't doubt his valour, do you?"

"Your duplicity," said Carstairs mournfully, "is shocking."

"And I'm sure the sailors would enjoy it. Poor fellows; their lives are very grey, Mr. Carstairs, very grey."

"Nothing to what mine would be," said Carstairs. "You won't hold me to my promise, Lady Penrose?"

"I certainly shall," she answered. "And here comes Captain Vobster," she added, as the burly figure of the skipper came down from the bridge. "Oh, captain!"

"Ma'am," said the skipper, pausing and raising his cap.

"Mr. Carstairs has got a little request to make. He was waiting to speak to you about it."

"Yes, sir?" said Vobster, looking from one to the other.

Carstairs shifted in his seat. "Lady Penrose finds life at sea rather dull, captain," he said, after an awkward pause, "and she was suggesting a little excitement which I feel sure you would not care to permit."

"Mr. Carstairs, that's not fair," said Lady Penrose sharply.

Captain Vobster gazed at her with admiration. "Anything that *I* can do to oblige Lady Penrose, sir——" he began.

Lady Penrose returned his glance of admiration with interest. "Thank you, Captain Vobster," she said warmly. "I felt sure of *your* support."

There was another long pause, broken at last by Carstairs. "Lady Penrose was wondering whether

you could provide a little—er—er—amusement," he said desperately.

"Amusement!" repeated the skipper, and, tilting his cap, scratched his head as an aid to thought.

"We want the crew to amuse us, captain," explained Lady Penrose.

The skipper's face cleared and his cap settled back into its place. "Crew," he said meditatively. "Lemme see. There's one of 'em plays the concertina, I know, because I've stopped him at it half a dozen times. And there's one of 'em can walk on his hands surprisingly well. Mr. Pope met him doing it night before last, and it gave him quite a shock."

Carstairs sighed. "Ah, I'm afraid Lady Penrose wouldn't be satisfied with simple, healthy amusements of that kind; she wants something more elaborate. This conversation is quite private, captain?"

"Certainly, sir," said that mystified mariner.

"Well, she—er—wants you to—to arrange a mutiny."

"As soon as possible," added the smiling Lady Penrose, "before it leaks out. To-morrow would do."

"A mutiny!" ejaculated the startled Vobster. "A mutiny! What, aboard of my ship?"

"Only an imitation one, you know," said Carstairs. "Just pretending."

"A little play, really," explained Lady Penrose hastily. "Like a charade, you know, or Dumbo Crambo. The crew seizing the passengers—only the men, of course—and holding the officers down."

"Hold——" repeated the skipper, in a strangulated voice. "Hold—holding the—I think I see 'em doing it. I think I see 'em—I—I——"

His face turned a deep purple and the veins in his neck swelled. Past speech, he took a turn up and down, gobbling helplessly. Lady Penrose sat regarding him with gentle interest.

"It is only fun, Captain Vobster," she said softly; "and the men would enjoy it so. They don't have much amusement, poor things. Their lives are very grey."

The skipper pulled up short and stood eying her. "And they'd be black and blue, too, before I'd done with them, if they laid hands on me," he growled.

"Then you refuse to give your consent, captain?" said Carstairs, with great cheerfulness.

"With all respect to you, sir, most certainly," said Vobster, still breathing hard. "I've been asked to do a great many things in my life, but I've never been asked before to let a pack of idle, good-for-nothing fo'c'sle sweepings hold me down. Never!"

"I'm so sorry," said Carstairs, turning to Lady Penrose, with an air of gentle regret, "but you see how it is, don't you? I was afraid all along that Captain Vobster wouldn't. You see, there is such a strong idea of discipline rooted in——"

"Yes, I know," said Lady Penrose impatiently, "but it's a great disappointment to me. Please leave me to myself for a minute or two; I want to think."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Carstairs, rising. "Come along, captain."

"I want him," said Lady Penrose calmly, as the relieved skipper turned to obey.

Carstairs started, and meeting the skipper's eye gave him a glance full of warning; Vobster, in return, favoured him with something as near a wink as his sense of discipline would allow.

"Come and sit here," said Lady Penrose, with a gracious smile, as Carstairs walked off. "I want to talk to you."

Captain Vobster looked around helplessly, and, accepting the inevitable, planted himself in the chair. A graven image would have looked more amenable to reason. Bolt upright, with his clenched fists on his knees, he sat ready to refuse all overtures.

"Have you ever set your heart upon having anything?" she inquired, in a small, timid voice.

"Very often," was the reply.

"Ah, you can sympathise with me, then," remarked Lady Penrose gently.

"And, generally speaking," said Captain Vobster, nodding to himself with great satisfaction, "it turned out fortunate for me that I didn't get it."

"How nice!" she murmured, with a vindictive glance. "But when you were engaged, Captain Vobster, and your *fiancée* asked you for anything——"

"She didn't," interrupted the skipper freshly.

"No?"

"No; she waited until we were married. Then," continued Captain Vobster, his face darkening, "she made up for it."

"It comes to the same thing," said Lady Penrose hopefully.

"Yes—she didn't get it," said Vobster, with a chuckle.

Lady Penrose laughed, and the skipper, relaxing, took up a more comfortable position.

"It is no good for anybody to try and get the better of you, Captain Vobster," she said, in admiring accents. "You have too much strength of mind. Do you know that in manner and appearance you remind me very much of Lord Merton?"

The astonished Vobster put his cap straight. "Indeed!" he murmured.

"The likeness is extraordinary; even your voices

are alike. When we get back I must introduce you; then you can see for yourself. You will come and see me, won't you?"

"I shall be delighted," was the reply.

"And then I shall be able to ask Mrs. Vobster about those things she didn't get."

The skipper shifted a little in his seat. "Oh, she'd be sure to tell you she got 'em," he said uneasily. "You see—she—she has got a sort of idea rooted in her head that she gets her own way. 'Course, I need hardly say——"

"Of course," agreed his listener, "anybody could see that."

"It pleases her, and it don't hurt me, if you understand."

"Perfectly," said Lady Penrose. "Now, Captain Vobster, as a special favour to me won't you oblige by helping us in our little play? It is only just private theatricals, and we can't do it without your consent. On board ship the captain is, of course, master. His word is law."

The unhappy skipper looked about him helplessly. "I never heard of such a thing before," he said awkwardly. "Never."

"Neither have I," said the temptress frankly; "and, of course, with most captains I shouldn't have dreamt of such a thing. With an ordinary captain,

destitute of any sense of humour, it would be impossible. Really—to tell you a secret—it was observing the command you have over your men that made me think of it first, I believe. That and your likeness to Lord Merton. *He* would have jumped at it. Shall we walk?"

She rose, and, placing her hand on the skipper's arm, paced slowly up and down. Her face expressed gentle resignation.

"You see, it's the sailormen," said the perturbed Vobster, after half a dozen turns.

Lady Penrose nodded. "Of course; but I know you well enough to know that you would have them thoroughly in hand all the time."

"And it would look so bad for me," continued the skipper. "What should I be supposed to be doing while those lazy rascals of mine were mutinying?"

"That would be all right," she said softly. "I thought of you first."

Vobster smiled. "Thank you," he said gratefully, "but I don't see——"

"Six of the biggest and most powerful men in the ship must seize you suddenly from behind and gag and bind you."

"Bind!" spluttered the skipper, dropping her

arm and springing back. "Bind! Gag! Bind and gag *me?* What, sailormen? ME!"

"And Mr. Carstairs and Sir Edward Talwyn and the others," said Lady Penrose, in a coaxing voice. "You won't be alone. Sir Edward is one of the oldest baronets in the kingdom, and he'll enjoy it. I am sure of it. Now, Captain Vobster, you will, won't you?"

She took his arm again without any assistance from him and gazed at him in mute appeal. He cleared his throat.

"I don't like to be a spoil-sport," he began firmly, "but when——"

"And you won't," she interrupted, with conviction. "I am sure you won't. After all, it's only acting. Why, I've seen a prince play the part of a servant-girl, in a dirty cap and apron with his nose smutted. Now, I'm not suggesting anything so undignified for you."

"Not gagging?" demanded the skipper thickly.

"Nothing like so bad. Of course, the men will only pretend to bind you," said Lady Penrose, looking up as Pope and Carstairs came towards them. "Oh, Mr. Carstairs, Captain Vobster, in the noblest fashion, has consented."

"EH?" said Carstairs and Vobster, in tones of blank amazement.

"He is a born actor," continued Lady Penrose. "He saw all sorts of possibilities in the part. He is going to be bound and gagged. Pretend to be, I mean."

"I—I——" began the indignant skipper. "I—I'm afraid——"

"Now, Captain Vobster," said Lady Penrose, with conviction. "I am quite sure that nothing could make you afraid."

"Bound and gagged?" repeated Pope, open-eyed. "Why, what's he done?"

"H'sh! Nothing," said Lady Penrose, with a radiant smile at the fermenting Vobster. "Nothing, except to refuse to say 'No' to a lady?"

"Well, nobody expected him to do that," said the mystified Pope.

Captain Vobster looked about him with the helpless gaze of a trapped animal. "Very well," he said thickly. "Very well; but I must have instructions from you before witnesses, sir. I won't do it without. And I'll have 'em in writing."

"Better do it now," said the triumphant Lady Penrose before Carstairs could speak. "Come along, Mr. Pope. Now, Mr. Carstairs."

She walked towards the drawing-room, the two gentlemen following, leaving Captain Vobster a prey to gloom alone on the deck. A harmless sea-

man passing to his work found himself brought up by a gaze of cold and concentrated venom. He faltered, and stood still.

"WELL?" inquired the skipper, in a hurricane voice.

"Yessir," said the man, and, backing slowly, turned and fled.

"Gagged!" said Vobster, to the mainmast in a broken voice. "By sailormen!"

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. POPE, with his hands clasped behind his back and his head bowed in thought, paced slowly up and down the deck. His face was grave and the lines on his brow suggested worry. Knight, coming out from the smoke-room, eyed him with concern.

"Halloa!" he cried, "what's the matter? Seen a blackbeetle?"

Pope gave him a baleful glance over the top of his glasses. "Run away and play," he said shortly.

"Right-o," said the other, crouching. "I'll hop you twice round the ship for tuppence."

"And try and be serious for once," said the older man, reddening. "I've got things to think about."

"What things?"

"Cabinet secrets," said Pope loftily.

"What are they? Now, it's no use looking at me in that fashion; you ought to know that by this time."

"Well, I can't tell you," grunted the other, looking around carefully. "Better go away; if Lady

Penrose sees us she may think I am talking about things I oughtn't to."

Knight nodded. "You go to your cabin," he said, in the low tones of a conspirator, "and I'll come in for a cigar."

Pope shook his head, but without decision, and after a turn or two disappeared. Knight gave him a couple of minutes' grace, and then entered his cabin.

"Halloa! Who'd have thought of seeing you here?" he exclaimed.

"Do be serious," said Pope testily. "I've a good mind to tell you, because I'm afraid things might get out of hand if I don't. They're shoving all the responsibility on to me."

"They generally do," murmured the other, eying him carefully. "I don't know what Carstairs would do without you."

"If things go wrong," said Pope, biting the end off a cigar and placing it in his mouth while he fumbled in his pocket for matches, "they'll blame me. Everybody will; Lady Penrose said so. Carstairs has given me full powers; he has left all the details to me."

Knight made a sympathetic noise and waited. To pass the time he took a cigar, and let it out

two minutes later in his interest at Pope's revelations.

"And I'm only telling you," concluded the latter, "because I thought that if you took it seriously things might go a bit too far. It would be a serious thing if you broke anybody's head."

"It would," said Knight grimly; "and more serious still if they broke mine. I'm going to tell Maloney; his temper is not exactly lamb-like. And what about the ladies? They'll be scared to death."

"I am to prepare them," replied Pope. "I've got to do everything, it seems to me. Lady Penrose doesn't want to appear in it, and Carstairs says he washes his hands of it. I've had no end of difficulty in trying to explain to the bo'sun what he has got to do. He is to be the ringleader."

"They couldn't have left it in more capable hands," said Knight warmly. "They have avoided disaster by relying on your common sense. And Vobster has got written instructions?"

Pope nodded, and Knight, relighting his cigar, paused to pay a few more well-turned compliments, and withdrew. In the solitude of his own cabin he sat for some time considering ways and means of turning the information he had received to his own advantage. He had an idea that it would be an odd thing if he could not fish to some purpose

in such troubled waters as a mutiny, and Maloney, whose cabin he invaded after dinner, felt disposed to agree with him. In low tones they discussed the situation.

"It's a bit hard on Tollhurst," said Knight slowly.

"We might give him the tip," suggested the doctor.

Knight shook his head. "I've got a better plan," he said, "if I could only get it carried out."

He bent to the doctor's ear, and whispered.

"Eh?" said the other, starting back. "Nonsense. It's impossible!"

"We'll see," said Knight. "With your assistance and——"

"You can count me out," interrupted the doctor coldly. "I'm not very particular, but Carstairs happens, for the time being, to be my employer."

"It would be doing him a good turn," said Knight eagerly.

"Also, there is a lady in the case," continued the other.

"Of course there is," retorted Knight. "I've just been telling you. It's her scheme, and there's no reason why she should object to having it touched up a little bit here and there. That's all I propose to do."

The doctor laughed and stretched himself.

"How are you going to manage it?" he inquired.

"I'm going to enlist the services of Biggs. I've left word for him to come round to my cabin at ten to-night. You can come, too, if you like. I'm disappointed in you—— I thought you'd have jumped at the idea. Anyway, I know you'll keep quiet. Pity you haven't got more spirit."

Maloney shifted. "That'll do," he said curtly. "And I don't think Biggs'll be much use to you."

Knight nodded. "He'll be all right," he said confidently. "He's very popular with the crew owing to his democratic notions. Moreover, he is at the present moment suffering badly from unrequited affection. Mudge has bestowed her hand and heart upon Markham, and I fancy that Biggs is in the mood at present for any mischief that turns up. He is in a reckless mood."

The doctor rose. "There'll be a little surgical work for me, if you are not careful," he remarked. "Mind, I'm not going to assist; I shall content myself with holding a watching brief."

"I knew you were all right," said Knight, with a grin. "Come along at ten to-night and see me handle Biggs."

As a matter of fact, very little handling was required. Mr. Biggs evinced no surprise at the recital, and, so far from objecting to Knight's im-

provements, came forward with some really good suggestions.

"That'll be all right, sir," he said, delicately puffing at a cigar Knight had given him. "The bo'sun has already told the crew what is to be done, and it'll be quite easy to make a few alterations. I was one of the first he told, him wanting my assistance. I've been teaching 'em how to howl this afternoon, down in the fo'c'sle. Surprising how slow they are at learning. They seemed to think they were a Sunday-school choir at first."

"Excellent," said Knight. "But you'll have to be careful with the bo'sun. Give him to understand that the new instructions are from Mr. Pope and the skipper and they preferred him to get them in a roundabout way. Tell him that it's Carstairs' wish, but nobody wants to appear responsible for it."

"Ay, ay, sir!" said Biggs, with a confident nod. "Tarn won't give any trouble. He's a stiff chap, but he's got the brain of a five-year-old. He'll believe anything *I* tell him. And if I could tell the hands that there was a fiver for them if things go off properly——"

"Of course," said Knight. "And, by the way, you had better not be one of the mutineers."

"Course not, sir," replied Biggs, in an injured

voice. "I'm one of the afterguard. I've already arranged with the chap that's to knock me out. Showed him just where to pretend to hit me. And told him to remember that it *is* pretending, too."

He helped himself to a whiskey and soda by request and went off.

"I thought he would be all right," said Knight, turning to the silent doctor. "He didn't like Lady Penrose interfering. She gave good advice to Mudge about Markham, so Mrs. Ginnell tells me. Biggs and Tarn are as thick as thieves now, and this business'll be a labour of love to 'em."

"I'll get a few dressings ready," said Maloney. "When is this affair supposed to start?"

"When we get to the island. Vobster expects to make it to-morrow. He prefers it to happen with the ship laid to. Pope says he is like a particularly nasty bear with a particularly nasty sore head. Can't get anything out of him except grunts."

The atoll, represented by the tops of a little cluster of coco-nut palms, came into sight an hour after lunch next day. Other scattered palms became visible as the *Starlight* drew near, and a little later the long, narrow strip of land with the surf thundering on the beach drew most of the company into the bows. They drifted back in ones and twos to the greater comfort to be found aft as the ship,

steaming along the weather side, came into view of the lagoon.

"How lovely!" said Miss Flack to Mrs. Ginnell, as the skipper shouted orders and the noise of the screw suddenly ceased. "I suppose this little play the crew have got up for us will be ready soon?"

"I hope so," said Mrs. Ginnell. "I am longing to get ashore."

"So interesting to see the dear sailors trying to act," murmured Miss Flack. "I thought Mr. Carstairs was looking rather worried this morning; perhaps it will cheer him up. But why weren't we allowed to tell the men?"

Mrs. Ginnell shook her head. "Don't know, I'm sure," she replied, with a puzzled air. "Mr. Pope said it was part of the play."

The voice of Captain Vobster was heard again from the bridge in a series of angry barks.

"The captain seems rather cross about something," said Lady Penrose, turning to Carstairs, with a smile. "I am feeling so excited."

"I am ashamed of myself," said Carstairs gravely. "It's a sorry trick for a man to play on a guest."

"Guest?" said Lady Penrose. "I don't understand you."

"Tollhurst," said Carstairs, raising his eyebrows.

Lady Penrose laughed. "Why should you think so particularly of Captain Tollhurst?" she inquired. "It's the same for him as the others. Suppose that Sir Edward or Mr. Knight or any of the others behave badly?"

"By Jove!" said the other, aghast. "I never thought of that. I may make several enemies instead of one; I shall not have a friend left. You will have to be very good to me."

"I will—if your fears are justified," she said, with a smile.

"Tiny little place," said Tollhurst, lounging up and gazing at the island. "However, it'll be a change after the ship."

"I hope it *is* uninhabited," said Lady Penrose.

"Plenty of us to look after you if it is not," returned Tollhurst, with a smile, "but Talwyn and I have been inspecting it with our glasses, and I don't think there is any doubt. Knight has been examining it, too. He seemed quite anxious about it. You're not looking very well, Carstairs! Feel all right?"

"Quite," replied Carstairs, who had been nervously glancing along the deck. "Ready for anything," he added desperately as he met Lady Penrose's gaze.

He looked idly at Mr. Biggs, who had come up

from the engine-room and was standing on the top of the ladder drinking in big draughts of fresh air. With a final gulp Biggs disappeared, and a minute later a couple of firemen, grasping iron bars and grinning sheepishly, came up the ladder and went forward. A seaman passed.

"What's that chap doing with a pistol?" exclaimed Tollhurst, gazing after him.

Carstairs swallowed, and shook his head as a low threatening murmur was heard forward. It died away as Captain Vobster began to speak, and then broke out again in increased volume.

"What's the matter?" inquired Peplow, coming up.

"Seems to be a little argument," replied Tollhurst. "Looks like trouble," he added as an extraordinary storm of hoots and groans broke out.

"Get back to your work," bellowed Vobster. "The first man that moves——"

A couple of pistol-shots rang out, and his voice was drowned in a prolonged and ferocious roar. The ladies, partly amused and partly scared, clustered round Carstairs.

"What on earth's happening?" shouted Knight. "By Jove! they've got the mate down. Well done, Vobster! Well done!"

"He's down, too," said Effie Blake, clasping her hands. "Oh!"

The burly form of the skipper disappeared in the press. Lady Penrose gave a faint scream. "Captain Tollhurst, save us!" she implored, as a body of seamen, waving pistols and clubs, came surging towards them. "Save us!" echoed the Misses Blake and Seacombe.

"Extraordinary!" murmured Tollhurst.

He sprang forward, and with a heavy blow knocked the leading man off his feet, and snatching a pistol from the hand of the next gave him a smart rap over the head with it. The next moment he was down and lost to view in a squirming mass of legs and arms. A seaman, extricating himself from the scrum, paid a profane but heartfelt compliment to the captain's teeth.

The whole thing was so rapid that for a few moments nobody moved. Then Peplow, moving forward, fell headlong over the foot of the watchful doctor. Biggs, dashing up from the engine-room, received a blow on the head as per arrangement and subsided; Talwyn was held back by Knight.

"No use," said the latter, in a hurried whisper. "Keept quiet and bide your time."

He caught his breath as Tarn, having finished

with the skipper, came rushing aft. The boatswain was transfigured. His eyes were blazing and his face contorted. A faint scream from Miss Flack paid tribute to his appearance.

"Now, my lads!" he bawled, "smartly with it. Into the boat with him; we don't want no owners aboard."

Before the astounded Carstairs could move he was seized by willing hands and forced to the side.

"Here! What the devil are you doing?" he gasped.

"Shove him in the boat and put him ashore," roared the boatswain. "Lively with it now. And you can put this lady in to keep him company."

"Stop, you fools!" shouted Carstairs, struggling violently, as a couple of hands seized Lady Penrose and bore her after him.

"How dare you?" she demanded wrathfully as they moved towards the boat. Her gaze fell on Captain Vobster, who, with a dirty cloth over his mouth and trussed like a fowl, was sitting with his back against the smoke-room. "Captain Vobster!" she cried. "Why don't you stop them? Stop them at once!"

"In with them," cried Tarn, levelling a pistol at the little knot of amazed passengers. "If any man moves I'll shoot him."

He stood until the couple were placed in the boat, and then, placing the pistol in his pocket, stepped forward and seizing Miss Mudge raised her in his arms. Miss Mudge, buffeting his face with one hand, seized a handful of hair with the other.

"Easy, my dear," cried the boatswain, his eyes watering. "'Ere, not quite so much of it. Lor' lumme, I wish I was coming with you!"

He relinquished her with relief. The boat was lowered and pulled rapidly towards the shore. Tarn, wiping his brow, stood considering.

"Take the others below while I make up my mind what to do with them," he said at last.

He walked to the side and stood for some time watching the receding boat. Then he turned, and bending down with his hands on his knees gazed respectfully at the protruding eyes and purple cheeks of the trussed Vobster.

"I 'ope I done it as you wished, sir," he said, with an uneasy wriggle. "No bloodshed, and everybody 'appy and comfortable."

CHAPTER XIX

BREATHING hard after a struggle which had ended in his landing on the island in a very uncomfortable fashion, Carstairs, with a face of blank amazement, stood watching the receding boat as it pulled across the still waters of the lagoon. He stood until it had passed the reef, and, reduced by distance to a mere speck, drew alongside the yacht. He turned to Lady Penrose and Miss Mudge, who stood behind.

"I don't know——" he began.

"Look!" exclaimed the girl breathlessly.

Carstairs looked seawards again, and, hardly able to believe his eyes, stood motionless as the ship, after picking up her boat, swung round and steamed away from the island. In a dazed fashion he turned and met the scornful gaze of Lady Penrose.

"Did you——" he began.

"I?" said Lady Penrose, with a gesture of impotent wrath. "I—— Oh, this is too much!"

She turned and walked away, waving an imperious hand as he offered to follow. Somewhat crestfallen

he came back and stood gazing at Miss Mudge, who, having made a comfortable place in the sand, was sitting in it indulging in the luxury of a good cry.

"There, there," he said uneasily, "don't cry."

"Ca-can't help it," said the girl, between her sobs. "I'm frightened. Have we got to stay here all night?"

Carstairs stooped and began to turn over a pile of stores that had been put out of the boat with them. "I don't know what the arrangements are exactly," he said, at length, "but it looks like it. Suppose you leave off crying and lend me a hand with this tent."

He began to drag the canvas higher up the beach, and Miss Mudge, after an aggressive sniff or two, wiped her eyes and followed with the pole. Twice the half-suffocated Carstairs had to extricate himself from folds of billowing canvas, but the tent was pitched at last and the stores moved into it. The generous quantity of goods provided did not lessen his uneasiness. There were things in tins, things in bottles, a fair-sized cask of water, and half a bag of ship's biscuit. A large axe and other tools, a gun and a revolver, blankets, and crockery of the enamelled order completed the tale of their belongings.

"Well, we sha'n't starve," he said, looking around.

"We sha'n't sleep," said Miss Mudge, eying the blankets dolefully. "Not even a pillow. And what are we to sit on?"

Carstairs, who was watching the distant figure of Lady Penrose proceeding slowly along the beach, made no reply. He turned and walked in the same direction, and, pausing irresolutely after a few steps, came back to the tent again.

He filled his pipe and sat for a long time smoking. The ship had disappeared and there was nothing in sight seawards but the still, blue waters of the lagoon and the tumbling seas beyond the reef. A glance sideways showed him Lady Penrose sitting down a quarter of a mile away and also looking out over the water. It was evident that she found his company distasteful.

"Better make some tea," he said, rising and fetching a small spirit-stove from the tent. "You can tell Lady Penrose that I have gone to explore the island and shall not be back for some time."

He went off in the opposite direction, and, reaching the end of the atoll, turned and proceeded along the weather side. The wind there was fresh and strong and the sea thundered at his feet in great white breakers. With his binoculars he scanned the

horizon in vain for any sign of the missing ship. Puzzled and perturbed, he continued on his way until, the desolation of the beach proving too much for him, he made his way across to the lagoon again.

Lady Penrose and Mudge went off together as he approached the tent, but, all things considered, he made a very substantial meal. He lit his pipe again when it was finished, and then, feeling himself somewhat in the way, went off along the beach and, making himself a comfortable seat in the white coral sand, sat down to think things over.

He came back to find the tent closed for the night. A blanket which had been thrown outside was evidently intended for his use, and somewhat touched by this sign of consideration for his welfare he hollowed out a bed in the sand and tried to arrange himself comfortably before the short twilight should disappear.

He fell asleep after a long period of wakefulness only to start up at dawn with a violent attack of cramp. The inhabitants of the tent awoke two seconds later, and the inflection of their whispers testified to their annoyance. Three times in all did Carstairs hurriedly forsake his couch and hop up and down on a leg that was trying to tie itself into knots; and three times did the murmuring of

the people within add to his discomfort. He rose at last just in time to forestall a fourth attack, and, making his way along the beach, stripped and waded into the lagoon.

Miss Mudge got up an hour later, and after a cautious glance round went down to the water and returned with a well-filled bucket.

"Has Mr. Carstairs gone?" inquired Lady Penrose from the interior of the tent.

The answer being satisfactory, she came out, and after a soapless wash in salt water sat down for Mudge to attend to her hair.

At the sound of a not very distant cough she sprang to her feet and, with her hair flying, disappeared hastily inside the tent.

"I beg pardon," said Carstairs, as Mudge stood regarding him with a hostile stare. "I'm sorry I disturbed Lady Penrose, but I have just found this little comb in my pocket. She may be glad of it."

"Mudge!" cried an imperious voice from the tent.

The girl stooped and put her head inside. "My lady doesn't require a comb, sir," she said, returning.

"Oh, all right. Sorry," said Carstairs, pitching it in front of her.

"My lady doesn't require a comb, sir," repeated Mudge, in severe accents.

"Just so," said Carstairs mildly. "Just so; but I suppose I can leave it in my—er—sleeping apartment if I wish? I shall not be back for some time."

He turned, and, keeping the fate of Lot's wife well in mind, disappeared in the distance. Lady Penrose, after watching from the tent, came out and sat on the beach again.

"I do hope there'll be no savages, my lady," said Miss Mudge, gazing helplessly at her mistress's hair. "Every time I woke up in the night I was thinking of them."

"I prefer savages to some civilised people," said Lady Penrose, glancing in the direction Carstairs had taken.

"Yes, my lady," said the girl dutifully, "but I'd like to see that Mr. Tarn again, that I would—I got *some* of his hair when he caught hold of me."

Lady Penrose sighed, and then, as the girl proceeded to use her fingers as a comb, uttered a sharp exclamation.

"You are not doing Mr. Tarn's hair," she said sharply. "Oh! You are hurting me! Don't be so clumsy!"

"I'm very sorry, my lady," murmured the offender, "but your hair is so thick. And I've never seen it in such a tangle before."

"It's never had such a pillow before," was the reply. "O-oh! Oh!"

"It's the sand in it, I think," said the girl, pausing. "If we'd only got a comb——"

"Yes, but we have not."

"No, we have not," said Miss Mudge, with a longing glance at Carstairs' comb. She tightened her lips and attacked her task once more.

"You are very clumsy," said the victim, wincing.

"Yes, my lady," said the girl, with a doleful sniff. "It isn't my fault. I'll do hair with anybody, if I've only got the things to do it with. And I'm afraid your hair will be ruined for ever. It does seem a shame."

Lady Penrose looked grave. "Has Mr. Carstairs gone for a walk?" she inquired.

"Yes, my lady."

"A long walk?"

"He said he shouldn't be back for some time," replied the girl.

There was a long silence, at the end of which Lady Penrose gave a slight cough. Miss Mudge started, and stepping backwards in an unobtrusive fashion picked up the comb, and, still using the fingers of her left hand, began to use the comb with the right. After a few seconds she abandoned the use of fingers altogether.

"You see, you can do it all right if you like," said her mistress.

"Oh, my lor——. Yes, my lady," said Miss Mudge respectfully.

She finished her task at last, and, Lady Penrose having retired to the tent to complete her toilet, busied herself with preparations for breakfast.

"Make haste," said a voice from the tent. "I am hungry."

"There's no matches," said the girl. "Mr. Carstairs must have gone off with them. Shall I go and ask him for them?"

Lady Penrose hesitated. "No," she said at last, "it doesn't matter. We can drink cold water."

Miss Mudge sighed, and with lagging footsteps went to the barrel and filled a couple of mugs with the refreshing beverage. A piece of stale bread and some oil that had once been butter completed the feast. And they had just finished, when the offender came sauntering up and with a cheerful smile asked for a cup of tea.

"Certainly," said Lady Penrose, as she got up and moved towards the tent. "You are our host, I believe. We have just finished."

Carstairs looked down at the remains of the feast.

"Good gracious!" he exclaimed. "Haven't you had any tea?"

"No matches," muttered Miss Mudge.

"I'm very sorry," said Carstairs, going on his knees and lighting the stove. "How thoughtless of me. Fill the kettle, please."

The girl obeyed with alacrity.

"And fetch a tin of something and some biscuits."

He waved the girl away when the kettle boiled and made the tea himself, and despite the fact that the mug he sent in to Lady Penrose was returned untasted, with a curt message to the effect that she had had her breakfast, partook of a hearty meal. Miss Mudge, without prejudice, accepted three mugs of tea.

He sat smoking after the meal and reviewing in all its bearings a situation which was becoming more and more difficult. He knocked out his pipe and raising his field-glasses looked long and earnestly at the horizon. The blue surface of the sea was unbroken, and there was no sound except the noise of the surf on the outer beach. He turned, with a grave face, as Lady Penrose emerged from the tent.

"This is extraordinary," he exclaimed.

Lady Penrose, who was walking on, paused for a moment. "I am glad you think so," she said over her shoulder.

"Incomprehensible," murmured Carstairs. "How-

ever, I suppose we must make the best of it. I hope you slept well?"

"Thank you; yes."

"I was afraid I might have disturbed you. I am not used to sleeping in the open, and I got somewhat cramped. The dew was very heavy."

Lady Penrose said "Indeed!"

"And I must say," exclaimed Carstairs, with sudden heat, "that the part is unworthy of your powers."

"Part, sir?" said Lady Penrose sharply. "Part?"

Carstairs nodded. "Little Miss Muffitt," he explained; "and, frankly, I don't like being the spider. The part doesn't suit me."

"Lit-tle Miss Muffitt!" repeated Lady Penrose, breathless with indignation.

"That's how it appears to me," said Carstairs. "Exactly like the old nursery rhyme. Directly I come, you disappear. Won't you please tell me why you are treating me like this?"

"Is there any need to ask?" she inquired.

"I think so," said Carstairs firmly. "I behave very well indeed; remarkably well, I might say, to keep my word to you, and this is all the thanks I get."

Lady Penrose stood eying him in perplexity. "When I made that foolish suggestion I was not

prepared for your—improvements," she said at last.

"Improvements," said the other. *"Mine?* Good heavens! You don't think that *I* arranged this, do you?"

"I imagine that the captain looked to you for orders, Mr. Carstairs."

"Orders!" repeated Carstairs. "Orders! I—I told him to do just what you suggested, and not a word more. Not a word. I thought that the whole thing would last about a couple of minutes, and I thought—I hoped—that it would deceive nobody. Why should I do such a thing? Give me a reason."

Lady Penrose gave a slight toss of the head. "I am not here to be catechised," she remarked coldly.

"But it's so unfair," protested Carstairs. "What reason could there possibly be for my behaving in such an outrageous fashion? You don't think I wanted to carry off Mudge, do you? Or—or—— By Jove!"

He stopped suddenly and gasped. Lady Penrose looked out to sea.

"Can't you see what an awkward position you have placed me in?" she said at last.

"Not me," said Carstairs earnestly. "I assure you that I know nothing whatever about it. I

shouldn't dare do such a thing. My respect and—and admiration—hopeless admiration—for you are far too great."

"Mr. Carstairs!" said Lady Penrose reddening.

"It's true," he said stoutly.

"I hope that the others will think so," retorted Lady Penrose, clasping her hands. "Think of Mrs. Jardine!"

"And Miss Flack, and the girls," said Carstairs helpfully. "Yes. Still, what does it matter? And I will be quite frank with you. I am enjoying this."

"Enjoying it?" she gasped. "What is there to enjoy?"

"Sense of adventure," replied Carstairs. "And look at the cool, bright green of those palms and the colour of the water. It's marvellous. But, above all and beyond all, I am enjoying the society."

Lady Penrose made a very creditable attempt to look bewildered.

"Mind," continued the other, "I am quite innocent in this affair; I had no more idea of being bundled into a boat like a truss of hay and landed here than you had, but the society of Lady Penrose compensates for everything."

"Mr. Carstairs!"

"It's true, and I had to say it. I've been wanting to say it for a long time."

"There's no need to say it to Mudge," retorted Lady Penrose, glancing at the tent.

"Sorry," said Carstairs, moving nearer to her, "but we are so far apart."

Lady Penrose drew back a little—perhaps a couple of feet. "But who *is* responsible for this?" she demanded. "Have the crew really mutinied?"

Carstairs shook his head. "I know no more than you do," he replied. "You heard all that passed so far as I'm concerned. Pope gave instructions as to details."

"Mr. Pope would never dream——" began Lady Penrose.

"No, no," said Carstairs. "It was real enough so far as I could see. And I must say that Tollhurst behaved splendidly. His behaviour was excellent. I was very pleased. He quite justified my opinion of him."

"I wonder whether he knew," murmured Lady Penrose.

"Nobody knew except ourselves and Pope," replied Carstairs, "and the ladies were only informed just before it happened. This comes of playing with edged tools."

"All my fault," said Lady Penrose, shaking her head. "I wonder you care to speak to me."

Carstairs laughed. "I would sooner talk to you

than do anything else in the world," he replied. "I am enjoying this amazingly. And you are not angry with me for—for telling you—how much I admire you?"

Lady Penrose bit her lip. "Mr. Carstairs," she said entreatingly, "if you only knew what ears Mudge has got!"

"I understand," said Carstairs, as he moved closer and led her along the beach. "Let's see how far she can hear."

Their voices died away in the distance, and Miss Mudge, watching them from the tent, thought sadly of Mr. Markham, Mr. Biggs, a young man in the general shop at Berstead, and three members of the crew.

CHAPTER XX

MR. TARN, somewhat overcome at the success of his leadership, stood in the saloon surveying his helpless victims. The truculence had faded from his face, and given way to an expression of acute uneasiness. He had got to the end of his tether, and was now looking anxiously round in search of a prompter.

"We don't want any more violence," said Knight, with a warning glance at him. "These ladies had better go to the drawing-room."

"As you please, sir," said the desperado mildly.

"And don't play with us," proceeded Knight, winking at him. "It's bad enough to be in your power without being played with like a cat with a mouse. We don't want any of your infernal sarcasm."

"My wot?" said the amazed boatswain, as the ladies departed under escort.

"I'm surprised at you, Tarn," said Pope, in a deep voice. "It'll be penal servitude for you for this."

"Or hanging," said Talwyn grimly.

The unfortunate boatswain looked round imploringly.

"It's no good using hard words," said Knight, turning on Pope. "We've got to make the best of things."

"And keep this pirate in a good humour," added the doctor, in a low voice. "Just get Talwyn and Peplow away while I reason with him. I think I understand his mentality. There's no objection to these gentlemen going on deck, I suppose?" he said, turning to Mr. Tarn.

"O' course not," said that gentleman effusively. "So long as they behave theirselves," he added ferociously as Knight glanced at him.

He stood tugging at his moustache and rolling his eyes as Pope, in a stately fashion, departed with his friends. Then his face relaxed and he gazed piteously at Knight.

"Wot about the skipper, sir?" he inquired desperately.

"What about him?" inquired Knight easily. "He's fast enough, isn't he?"

"He's fast enough, sir," conceded the boatswain, "and Brown is standing on guard over him with the cook's chopper. But wot's to be done now?"

Knight shook his head. "You are in charge," he said slowly. "I know all about it. You have

had your instructions from Mr. Pope and the skipper, haven't you?"

"In a roundabout way, yes," replied Mr. Tarn; "but you heard wot Mr. Pope said about penal servitood just now."

"Only his fun; he has got to keep up appearances," said Knight.

"And I *don't* like the way the skipper looks at me," pursued Mr. Tarn, in an aggrieved voice.

"Keeping up appearances," said Knight again. "What are you worrying about? He told you to pretend to head a mutiny, didn't he?"

Mr. Tarn nodded. "And he told the officers not to interfere," he said, seeking to comfort himself. "And then Mr. Pope told me; and then Biggs come along and told me to do things that Mr. Pope and the skipper didn't want to tell me themselves. I tell you, I'm fair muddled up with it all."

"You're on velvet," said Knight definitely.

"Well, I wish I was off of it," retorted the boatswain. "And wot I want to know is, wot's to be done now? The first officer is shut up in his cabin and laying on 'is back smoking; Captain Tollhurst is shut up in *his* cabin calling out for his boots and 'is firearms, wot we took away from 'im; and the skipper looks as if he might 'ave a fit at any moment."

"I should carry on if I were you," said Knight thoughtfully. "Take us for a little cruise in the neighbourhood, and return to the island to-morrow and pick up Mr. Carstairs and the others. And mind, whatever you do, don't take any notice of anything Mr. Pope says, he has got to go on pretending, you know. He is not supposed to know anything about it. Let's go up and see whether the boat is back yet."

He followed the boatswain on deck just as the boat came alongside. Mr. Minns, the second officer, with an odd grin on his good-tempered face, was gazing in a speculative fashion at the skipper and the uneasy-looking seaman who stood guard over him with the chopper.

"Skipper plays his part well," said Knight in a low voice.

Mr. Minns, after a quick glance at him, nodded. "How many of you are in this?" he inquired. "And what's the next thing? Do you scuttle the ship, or burn it? It's all in the day's work. Don't mind me."

Knight shook his head. "I'm not sure," he said slowly. "I imagine the skipper has got his instructions. He doesn't look very comfortable; but I suppose we had better leave him alone. If he were released he would have to do something for the

sake of appearances to get charge of his ship again."

"I'm not going to release him, if that's what you are driving at," said Mr. Minns hastily. "He told me I wasn't to interfere; and I obey orders. If anybody had told me that the old man would let himself be handled like this I wouldn't have believed him. Where's the pleasure in it? That's what I want to know. Where's the pleasure?"

He went back to the bridge, stopping on the way to receive instructions from a boatswain whose manner was an unhappy compromise between truculence and deference. The doctor came on deck as the yacht got under way again, and, walking with Knight past the skipper, took careful stock of that hapless mariner.

"Vobster's got to be untied," he said, as soon as they were out of earshot. "It's no position for a man of his years and temper; he'll burst something if he has much more of it. Tell Tarn to take that fool with the chopper away, and leave me a clear deck."

He went below to his cabin and then to the smoke-room and mixed a long whiskey and soda. The ice in the tumbler tinkled pleasantly as he came out on deck and in a stealthy fashion made his way to the pinioned Vobster and sat down beside him.

"Easy does it," he said, in a low voice. "If I undo your mouth, will you promise not to make a noise?"

The skipper, with his eyes glued to the tumbler, nodded vigorously, and Maloney, with a cautious look around, took off the gag and held the tumbler to his lips. Slowly the skipper's head tilted backwards until not a drop of the precious fluid remained.

"Good?" inquired the doctor, placing the glass on the deck.

"Splendid," murmured Vobster. "Cut these things away. Quick! Cut these—cut these—cut—cut——"

"Bless my soul," said Maloney, with a grin as Knight came up. "He's gone to sleep."

He took out his knife and cut the bonds, and, the skipper being unable to do it for himself, straightened out his legs for him, and lowered his head to the deck. Then he signalled to Mr. Tarn, who, in a state of some trepidation, was watching the proceedings from afar off.

"Get two or three of the hands and have him carried to bed," he said, as the boatswain came up. "He's tired."

"Yessir," said Mr. Tarn doubtfully. "And suppose he wakes up while they are a-carrying of 'im?"

"He won't," said the doctor.

"But s'pose he does?" persisted the other.

The doctor rose to his feet and advanced on the boatswain, who backed hastily.

"D'ye doubt my skill, you imitation pirate?" he demanded wrathfully. "Take him below, and look sharp about it."

He lent the procession his moral support by accompanying it below and adjuring it in forcible terms when it allowed the skipper's head to come into violent contact with the side of his bunk. The boatswain saw fit to regard the incident in a favourable light.

"Sleeping beautiful," he said, with an admiring glance at the doctor. "I—I wonder whether Captain Tollhurst is thirsty?"

The doctor, who was removing the skipper's clothes preparatory to putting him to bed, looked up, and under the awful witchery of his glance Mr. Tarn, muttering broken apologies, backed out of the cabin and made his escape.

By the time Maloney reached the deck again the island had almost disappeared, the tops of one or two palms being the only things in sight. In a short time they also vanished.

"I suppose Minns will be able to find it again," he said, turning to Knight.

"He'll have to," was the reply.

Maloney took his arm and paced him up and down the deserted deck. The third officer, who was in a state of sulky amazement, eyed them curiously as he passed on his way to the bridge.

"And what do you expect to get out of all this?" inquired the doctor at last.

Knight shrugged his shoulders. "They wanted a mutiny," he said, "and I have given it to them. Also I have paid off a little bit of my score to Lady Penrose. She got up the mutiny to take a rise out of Tollhurst, and instead of that she is made the victim of her own cleverness. Think how awkward it will be for her when she comes aboard again. She has got to sail all the way home with Tollhurst and the other people. She'll see the joke in the face of every member of the crew, and I think she will be much too quiet and subdued to interfere with me much."

"Upon my word!" began the doctor, staring at him.

"And the story will follow her home," continued Knight, "with improvements, probably. She will be credited with having tried to kidnap Carstairs."

"I ought to have stopped it," said Maloney, shaking his head.

"That's what will happen unless some good angel intervenes," Knight went on.

"Are you the good angel?" inquired the other crisply.

Knight nodded. "I might be, if it's made worth my while," he replied. "I think I can handle the situation all right. As a preliminary I have just picked the skipper's pocket. Pope told me of a little paper authorising the old man to permit the mutiny, which I thought might come in useful. Anyway, it's safer with me."

"We're a nice couple," said Maloney, with a grin. "I hocus the man's drink and you go through his trouser pockets. If other things fail we might go into partnership."

"To-morrow morning," said Knight thoughtfully, "I propose to take possession of the ship and go back and rescue the victims. If they are not grateful—as grateful as I think they ought to be—I shall have to talk to them plainly. And now let us go and reassure the ladies."

They found the ladies in the drawing-room with Pope, Talwyn, and Peplow vainly endeavouring to explain a position that none of them understood. A little exclamation of joy from Mrs. Ginnell greeted their entrance.

"Now tell us all about it," she said, making room

for Knight to sit beside her. "I'm sure you know. Has something gone wrong? Mr. Pope is a perfect sphinx."

"Not my fault," grumbled Pope.

"But you knew something about it," said Mrs. Jardine. "You told us not to be frightened, and that the men were going to act a little play to us. How did you know about it?"

"Play!" exclaimed Knight and the doctor together in surprised accents.

"I can't explain," said Pope. "It is a secret. I must see Vobster first."

"Vobster's asleep," said the doctor. "I'm treating him, and I won't have him disturbed. But what do you mean by 'play'?"

"I can't tell you," said Pope, with a worried look.

"If Pope has passed his word," said Knight, with a benignant glance at that gentleman, "you may as well give it up. Wild horses wouldn't induce him to break his word."

"And I am almost as much in the dark as you are," said Pope earnestly.

"Almost!" repeated Mrs. Jardine, in a significant voice. "Was it part of the play to leave Mr. Carstairs and the others on a desert island?"

"And knock Captain Tollhurst down?" added Miss Flack.

"And frighten us all to death?" said Miss Blake, with a laudable attempt to suit her expression to her words.

Mr. Pope smiled wanly, and, to the indignation of the company, edged slowly towards the door and disappeared. Mrs. Jardine and Miss Flack exchanged glances.

"Most mysterious," said the former.

"Most," said Miss Flack, with a little shiver.

"We must make the best of it," said Knight, with an air of pious resignation, as he left Mrs. Ginnell and took a seat next to Miss Seacombe. "Nobody is injured, and the crew seem to me to be unusually civil in the circumstances."

"Civil!" said Talwyn, starting up. "Civil! There is an armed sentry over Tollhurst's door, and when I went there just now he ordered me off. When I demurred he asked me whether I wanted one in the ha—ha—bread-basket!"

He looked round indignantly as Maloney, with an odd, spluttering noise, made a dive for the doorway and disappeared.

"How dreadful," said Mrs. Jardine, turning sympathetically to Talwyn.

"It is," said Knight. "There are five ladies here, and they all seem to understand the meaning of the word. In my young days——"

"This is no time for flippancy," retorted Mrs. Jardine, drawing herself up. "It is most serious. I am sure I don't know what to think. Surely the crew are not going to leave Lady Penrose and Mr. Carstairs on that island to starve?"

"Or draw lots," said Mr. Peplow, in a sepulchral voice.

Mrs. Jardine swung round in her chair and, putting up her glasses, stared him back into the silence from which he had emerged.

Dinner was a somewhat dreary function that evening, but it was reassuring to find that, so far as the ship was concerned, the usual routine was maintained. The waiters went about their work as though they had never heard of such a thing as a mutiny; and Markham, somewhat paler of face and tighter of lip than usual, presided with his accustomed efficiency.

After the well-lighted saloon and the cheerfulness engendered by a comfortable meal the deck seemed dark and sinister. Even Knight, pacing up and down with Maloney, confessed to a slight feeling of uneasiness as he peered into the darkness and thought of the loneliness of the island beyond.

"We are not a great distance away," he said, "and to-morrow we'll have them safe and sound aboard again."

"Man proposes"—said the doctor comfortably. "Meantime I'll go and have a look at my patient. I don't want him to get up too soon, and undo all the good I've done him; it might lead to complications."

With the advent of a bright, clear morning Knight's misgivings, never very profound, faded away. The air was clean and exhilarating, and in a cheerful mood he paced the deck waiting for the sound of the breakfast bell. One by one most of his fellow-voyagers appeared from below, and after vain speculations as to the state of affairs obeyed the summons of the bell and trooped down to the saloon.

"We seem to be a small party," said Mrs. Jardine, looking around. "Where's Sir Edward and Mr. Peplow?"

Knight shook his head. "Overslept themselves, perhaps," he said, stirring his coffee.

"We were rather late last night," said Pope, "and perhaps they slept badly. I did."

It appeared that everybody had slept badly, except those that hadn't slept at all, and Miss Flack was just in the midst of a harrowing recital of her experiences with insomnia when Mrs. Jardine, with a sharp exclamation, held up her hand.

"What's that noise?" she demanded quickly. "It sounds like Captain Tollhurst."

There was no doubt of it. The captain's voice, hard and commanding, sounded from above. Hoarse shouts were heard in reply, and as Knight swung his chair round preparatory to rising a couple of seamen descended the stairway at a bound and, after a wild look around the saloon, dived hastily beneath the table. Mrs. Jardine rose with a faint scream as Talwyn came running down with a rifle.

"Come out!" he shouted. "If you're not out before I count ten I'll shoot."

On the stroke of five the two men came out on all fours, and under orders from Talwyn preceded him upstairs with their arms raised. The ladies, who had risen and huddled together in one corner, looked at each other aghast.

"All right," said Maloney, finishing his coffee; "nothing to be alarmed about. Second act, I expect. You wait down here."

He bounded up the steps, followed by Knight and Pope, and, gaining the deck, stood meditatively scratching his nose. Tollhurst, with a pistol in his hand, was shouting orders to the red-faced third officer on the bridge; Markham, armed with a rifle, was standing over the fo'c'sle hatch; Peplow and Talwyn, also armed, were pacing the deck. A

wounded seaman with his hand clapped behind him was leaning against the side, and a yard or two away Albert, still clutching a small penknife, stood regarding him in nervous triumph.

"That little wiper done it," said the sailor, as the doctor went towards him. "Crept up behind while I was walking along with my 'ands up."

"Take him below," said Tollhurst, in a sharp, quick voice, as he came towards them. "It's all right, doctor; I've retaken the ship."

CHAPTER XXI

"IT was Markham who struck the first blow," said Tollhurst, as he received the nervous congratulations of the ladies. "He sent the sentry to sleep and then let me out. The rest was quite easy—I looked after that."

"Sent the sentry to sleep?" murmured Mrs. Jardine.

"Hypnotised him," explained Miss Flack.

"With his fist," said Tollhurst, "it's quicker than the open hand. Markham knows how to use his hands a bit, and he was in a pretty bad temper, too. He's coming out quite strong. Knight, you had better get hold of something. I don't think there will be any more trouble, but it is as well to be ready."

"I'll borrow Albert's penknife," said Knight scowling. "Or perhaps I can find something in Mrs. Ginnell's work-basket."

"It's nothing to joke about," said Mrs. Jardine severely. "We might all have been killed."

"Or landed on desert islands," said Miss Flack, with a shiver. "Fancy last night all alone on that

little rock, beset by surging seas, I couldn't sleep for thinking of it, not a wink."

"It's all right now," said Tollhurst confidently. "We'll soon have them on board again. The bridge is under my orders, and we are on our way back to the island."

There was a chorus of admiration as all eyes turned on the strong man. Knight, gravely perturbed at this threatened blow to his plans, went moodily outside. The spectacle of Pope doing sentry-go on the deck with his rifle at the slope helped to revive his drooping spirits.

"Halt!" he shouted gruffly. "*Ordah-ums* — —*staneasy*—*stan-dat-ease*—You may smoke."

Pope eyed him scornfully.

"For heaven's sake leave him alone," cried Maloney, appearing on deck. "He's got the darned thing loaded and cocked. If it goes off on his shoulder it's only the funnel or a cloud that will suffer. If he starts doing pat-a-cake things with it some of us will be killed."

"Perhaps you're right," said the other. "But I was only trying to do him a kindness. Surely there's no need for him to look like a cross between Captain Kidd and Julius Cæsar."

"It won't hurt 'em—they're both dead," said the doctor impatiently. "Where's that boy Albert?

I've put a bit of sticking-plaster on that fool in the foc's'le, but he will have it that he's dying and he wants to see Albert to forgive him before he goes."

He caught sight of the page and beckoned.

"But I don't want to go if he's dying, sir," said the boy, with a scared expression. "I didn't mean to kill him. I just did my duty, but I'd no idea——"

"He's not dying," said the doctor, "but he thinks he is, and he says it'll ease his mind more than anything to see you. Off you go."

"What about sending an armed escort with him?" inquired Knight, with a glance at Pope.

"Better not," said the doctor, as the boy went off with lagging steps, "the man's nerves are quite bad enough as it is. Sudden joy might be fatal."

He nodded at the indignant Pope, and taking Knight by the arm led him off.

"What are you going to do now?" he inquired, as soon as they were out of earshot. "Seems to me the man-eating Tollhurst has queered your pitch. He has saved everybody, and is now on his way to rescue the victims on the island. It's his show, not yours. Still it will make it more awkward than ever for Lady Penrose to owe her safety to him."

"He's a muddling, officious, interfering ass," said the offended Knight.

"He's master of this ship," remarked Maloney with a grin. "And he's basking in the sunshine of the ladies' smiles. They all love a strong man. Did you happen to observe the way Miss Seacombe looked at him? *What's that?"*

"Sounds like a dog," said Knight, with a puzzled air, as faint and distant yelps sounded from below.

The doctor stood listening. "It's Albert," he said, with sudden conviction, as the noise, which had now merged into a lusty bellowing, came nearer. "What's wrong, I wonder?"

"Frightened, I suppose," replied Knight, as the boy with one sleeve across his streaming eyes came stumbling on deck.

Maloney laughed. "It's all right," he said, catching the boy by the arm. "There's nothing to be scared about. He's no more dying than you are. He's been playing on your feelings."

"Playing!" wailed Albert. "I—I wish he—he had been—playing. I wish he *was* dying. He—he—he——"

"Well?" said the doctor, after waiting a reasonable time.

"He was laying in—bed when I got down," continued the boy, "and he s-said it was very k-kind

of me to come and see 'im and now he c-could die peaceful. He said he forgave me for—k-killing 'im and said he'd like to give me something to r-remember him by, and asked me w-w-what I'd like——"

"And what did you choose?" inquired the doctor with commendable gravity.

"I said I'd have his watch and chain, sir," replied Albert, breaking out into a torrent of angry sobs, "and he—he—showed me a bit of rope with a kno—kno—knot—in the end of it, and said he—he'd give me that—instead—and he—he—*did*."

He moved off to pour his sorrows into the ear of the indignant Markham; Maloney keeping pace with Knight, resumed the interrupted conversation.

"Tollhurst will spoil everything," said the latter gloomily. "Can't you get Vobster on his legs again?"

The doctor nodded. "I'm afraid of ructions between him and Tollhurst," he said slowly. "However, it's the only thing to be done, and he ought to be waking by now. These guns will go off of themselves if we are not careful."

He went off to his cabin and, after lingering fondly over his drugs, proceeded to Vobster's. The skipper was in bed, but his big red face rose up from the pillow at the sound of the opening door, and his eyes blinked owlishly at the visitor.

"How are we?" inquired the latter.

Vobster sat upright and, rubbing his eyes vigorously, tried to collect his scattered faculties. In a mechanical fashion he took the glass the doctor offered, and drained it. After which he shuddered, and, snatching at the top of the sheet, used it as a napkin and tooth-brush combined.

"Now get up and have a wash," said the doctor, turning on the water. "Give your head a good sluicing. Out with you."

He helped the other out of bed, and, guiding his heavy feet to the washstand, took up the sponge and began to assist him. A liberal cascade down the spine did more than anything to restore the skipper's senses. It also restored the gift of speech. Pearls floated through the porthole.

"You're better," said Maloney.

The skipper turned an infuriated face on him. "What are you doing?" he spluttered. "What's it all about? What are you doing in my cabin?"

"Think," said the other impressively.

The skipper spoke instead. He spoke at some length, using much repetition, as the heathen do.

"Carry your mind back," said the impassive doctor. "Who was it cut your bonds and carried you off to bed? Who took the gag out of your

mouth and put a nice strong whiskey and soda there instead?"

Captain Vobster reeled and sat down suddenly on the edge of his bunk. "Good Lord!" he said thickly. "I'd forgotten."

He grabbed his trousers from the floor and put them on hastily. "What's happened?" he jerked out as he fastened the braces. "Wait till I get my hands on that bo'sun. Where's Mr. Carstairs?"

"On the island," was the reply, "with Lady Penrose and her maid."

The skipper collapsed again.

"That's what comes of playing with edged tools," continued the doctor severely. "There might have been murder done while you were sitting comfortably on your beam-ends unable to prevent it."

"What d'ye mean?" demanded the skipper with a faint attempt at bluster.

"We both know," replied the other calmly, "and out of pure good nature I'm going to try and get you out of a mess that the master of a ship ought never to have got into."

Captain Vobster compressed his lips, and, putting on his coat, buttoned it with painstaking care.

"Tarn is not to blame, mind," continued the doctor, holding up a finger. "He thought the orders came from you. Somebody took advantage of his

innocence and carried the joke a little further, that's all."

"Who's been carrying on?" inquired the skipper, with a groan.

"Second officer," replied Maloney. "At least, he was until this morning, and then Captain Tollhurst retook the ship and drove the men below. He is in command now."

The skipper took a deep breath, so deep and so heavy that the doctor turned instinctively and soused the sponge again.

"Drop it!" yelled the skipper, recovering. "Command! I'll soon show him who is in command aboard this ship."

"Go easy," counselled the doctor, catching him by the arm as he seized the handle of the door. "Remember that Tollhurst thinks this is all serious. He got rather a mauling yesterday, and the last he saw of you you were tied up hand and foot by your own men. Take my advice: go up and take command as though nothing had happened. Don't attempt to disarm anybody, and don't discuss things. Pretend that they are doing it for their own amusement, if you like. Laugh at them."

The skipper nodded. "I believe you're right," he said slowly, and, opening the door, made his way above. Arrived on deck, he paused, and, after

the immemorial custom of shipmasters, glanced aloft before proceeding towards the bridge. Captain Tollhurst, a picturesque figure in white flannels, with a revolver thrust in his sash, stepped hastily towards him.

"Glad to see you again, cap'n," he said significantly.

"Thankee," returned the skipper, continuing his leisurely progress.

Tollhurst eyed him in astonishment. "Rather curious times," he remarked.

"Ay, ay," said the other. He glanced out of the tail of his eye at Peplow, who came up carrying a shot-gun at the trail, and smiled broadly. Peplow glanced in pained amazement at Tollhurst.

"You seem amused," said the latter stiffly.

"Don't mind me," replied the skipper indulgently as Miss Flack and Mrs. Jardine came out of the drawing-room and took up a position behind Tollhurst. "So long as you are happy and amused, that's everything."

"Amused? Do you think we are doing this for fun?" demanded Tollhurst stiffly.

"I thought so," said the skipper, looking puzzled. "It's been a game all along, hasn't it? A little change from deck-quoits and things of that sort?"

He beamed upon them in a paternal fashion,

and placing his hand on the rail mounted slowly to the bridge. Mr. Peplow, blushing painfully, went below and divested himself of his gun; Tollhurst in an unobtrusive fashion removed the pistol from his sash and slipped it into his pocket.

"He's gone crazy," he said, referring to Captain Vobster.

Mrs. Jardine exchanged glances with Miss Flack. "I wonder whether Captain Vobster is right," she said musingly. "The whole thing is a mystery to me. It's very curious."

"Very," echoed Miss Flack. "I thought just now that Captain Tollhurst had saved us all, but of course if it was only a game— Did you understand it was a game, Captain Tollhurst?"

"I don't know what he is talking about," replied Tollhurst, grinding his teeth.

"Makes us all look so ridiculous," said Knight, who had just joined the group. "I am so thankful now that I didn't succumb to temptation and convert myself into a portable armoury. Freddie's aspect was absolutely terrible."

"If it's a game," said Talwyn, with chilly emphasis, "I shall be glad to know who is responsible for it. I shall also be glad to know Carstairs' opinion of it—when he returns."

He placed his hand on Tollhurst's arm and the

pair disappeared into the smoke-room. Seamen appeared from below in ones and twos and went about their work. Mr. Tarn, making a belated appearance, was observed to be in close and confidential intercourse with Captain Vobster. Judging by his wriggling he appeared to be undergoing a somewhat stiff cross-examination; but it was evident from the wink he bestowed upon Mr. Biggs on his return that he had survived it.

"All right?" inquired Mr. Biggs, somewhat anxiously, as he lounged up to him a few minutes later.

Mr. Tarn nodded. "I told 'im I done as I was told," he replied. "When he arst me who told me, I said the orders come from 'im in a manner of speaking, but I couldn't tell 'im 'ow if he was to cut me up in five million pieces. When I said p'raps I'd gone a bit beyond 'is orders, he swore he 'adn't given me none. He's a bit excited—got to talking about wot he called my ugly mug, afore he'd finished."

The skipper's excitement died down during the day and gave place to a condition of sulky uneasiness. Under the doctor's advice he turned a deaf ear to all questions, and the only satisfaction the passengers received was the news that the *Starlight* was proceeding as fast as her engines could carry

her to the rescue of Carstairs and his companions in misfortune.

"And I hope that Mr. Carstairs will insist upon a full explanation," said Miss Flack.

"And then retail it to us," said Mrs. Jardine, in a thin voice. "I must confess that I am very curious."

It was the condition of everybody on board, as Knight, who paid a visit to the skipper in his cabin after lunch, told him.

"They're just bursting with it, aren't they?" he said, turning to Maloney, who had accompanied him.

"Let 'em burst," said Vobster churlishly.

"At present," pursued Knight, "they're just guessing at things—putting two and two together, so to speak. What they'll say when they know the truth I can't imagine. Tollhurst is the worst—he's been made to look a bit ridiculous, and he doesn't like it. He's got a cousin who is editor of a newspaper, and I expect the whole thing will be made public as soon as we get home."

"D——n the newspapers," said Vobster, "and the public," he added impartially.

Knight murmured acquiescence. "Very awkward, all the same," he said thoughtfully. "Of course, it will be worse for you than anybody else. The

idea of a skipper giving his crew orders to mutiny, and then tie him up as though he were going to play what the children call 'Honey-pots,' is almost incredible. Do you know the game?"

"You get out of my cabin," vociferated the indignant skipper. "Who asked you to come here?"

"With pleasure," said the unmoved Knight. "I merely came to try and do you a kindness, that's all. However, if you prefer to have your portrait in the public press, with *'Captain Vobster, the Honey-pot Champion,'* underneath——"

Maloney flung his arms around the skipper's waist just in time. Baulked of his prey, the latter subsided on the settee and sat glaring darkly at his would-be benefactor.

"Do you a kindness," repeated Knight. "If this comes out it might be some time before you get a ship again. If you can keep your officers' mouths shut I think I can get you out of it."

"How?" inquired the other, still glaring.

"That's my affair," was the reply. "I've already cautioned Pope and the bo'sun to keep quiet, and if you'll put me ashore alone I think I can fix Carstairs. If the others get hold of him first it'll all come out."

"Suppose they want to go?" growled Vobster, considering.

"What's that got to do with it?" said Knight. "When we get to the island put me ashore. If anybody else wants to go, don't let em. You're master of this ship, aren't you?"

Maloney caught the skipper's eye. "Better trust him," he said encouragingly. "He's the most unscrupulous chap I ever met; but you can't be in a worse fix than you are."

The skipper sat pondering. "All right," he said at last, "have it your own way. And if you never come back I don't know that I shall be sorry."

CHAPTER XXII

THE island was sighted about an hour later, and it was clear from the behaviour of the passengers that a landing on an extensive scale was contemplated. Boat parties were arranged, and, by universal consent, a place was reserved for the bereaved Markham; Albert, in view of his sufferings in the general cause, was also included. On these preparations the skipper bestowed a frosty smile but made no comment, and it was not until the *Starlight* was hove-to on the weather-side of the island and two little groups gathered by their respective boats that he showed his hand.

"Not go ashore?" demanded Tollhurst in a loud voice. "Why not?"

"My orders," said the skipper laconically.

"I don't understand," said Talwyn, coming forward haughtily. "Do you mean to say that you forbid us to go?"

"I don't say that," said Vobster, "you must do as you please. All I say is that you are not going in my boats."

"But this is preposterous," claimed Tollhurst, as an indignant murmur arose from his friends. "We insist upon going. We are Mr. Carstairs' guests, and if we choose to go ashore we will. Pope, I suppose you are in charge while Carstairs is away; what are your orders?"

"I really think——" began Pope, in his deepest tones.

"Think as much as you like, sir," said Vobster, reddening. "I'm the only man that gives orders here."

He turned away and paced slowly up and down as one of the boats was lowered. Tollhurst and Talwyn eying him defiantly, went to the accommodation ladder and endeavoured, but in vain, to push past the seamen in charge. Their anger was not lessened when they saw Knight trip jauntily down the ladder and step into the waiting boat.

"Why is he allowed to go?" demanded Tollhurst.

"My orders," repeated the skipper.

The oars dipped and the boat shot away. The noise of many people, all speaking at once, was borne after it, and Knight, turning his head, was oddly reminded of the mobbing of an owl. The demonstration was not concluded until Vobster had climbed to his perch on the bridge.

The lagoon was reached after a stiff pull, and the seamen, relaxing their efforts, took it easy across the smooth water in the direction of a tent on the beach. Four noble hearts throbbed as one as Miss Mudge, aroused by the sound of oars in rowlocks, burst out of the tent and stood frantically waving at them.

"It's all right, miss," said the bow-oar as the boat grounded and the men jumped out and hauled it up on the beach. "We've come to take you back."

Miss Mudge, clasping her hands dramatically, raised her eyes to the sky.

"I had given up all hope," she said in moving tones. "Oh, if you only knew what I have suffered, you wouldn't——"

"Where's Mr. Carstairs?" interrupted Knight sharply.

Miss Mudge pointed to the right. "The last I saw of him," she said precisely, "he was walking along the beach with my lady. Shall I go and tell them you're here?"

"I'll go," said Knight, moving off. "You stay where you are."

Miss Mudge hesitated, and then, seating herself on the side of the boat and shading her eyes with

her hand, looked out to sea. "Where is the yacht?" she inquired.

"T'other side, miss," said one of the men. He stood looking at her for a moment, and then perched himself delicately against the side of the boat about a yard away. Inch by inch the intervening space disappeared.

"Bill," he said softly as another seaman prepared to seat himself on the left of the attraction, "if you and Joe and Bob like to go for to stretch your legs a bit I'll stand by the boat."

"Ay, ay," said Bill, seating himself. "Was it very lonely, miss?"

Miss Mudge clasped her hands. "Oh, awful," she said, with a shiver. "I didn't get a wink of sleep all night. I was so frightened."

Bill gave a sympathetic groan. "I couldn't sleep neither," he said in a low voice. "Every moment, just as I was dropping off, I thought of you cast away 'ere, and woke up agin, with a start."

"I didn't go to bed at all," said the voice of Joe from behind. "I felt as if I should choke if I laid down."

"It's a wonder to me he don't choke *now,*" said Bill, in amazed accents.

"Or be struck dead," said Tom.

"But you helped to put me ashore," said the

girl severely. "You were all as bad as one another."

"We only done wot we was told, miss," said Joe, coming round the boat and seating himself on the beach at her feet. "Orders is orders, but I'd much rather 'ave been told to go up to the masthead and chuck myself into the sea."

"He will be struck dead," said Tom with conviction.

"It's all very dreadful," said Miss Mudge, clasping her hands again. "When I think of that Mr. Tarn having the cheek to take me up in his arms as if I was a bundle of washing, and you all howling like wild beasts, I don't know what to think. I shall never be the same again; my trust in my fellow-creatures has gone—I shall never see a sailor again without shuddering."

The information was received in pained silence, broken at last by Bill, who had been regarding with silent indignation the manœuvres of his shipmate on the beach.

"If you don't like that nasty, oily 'ead in your lap, miss," he said, in tones of outraged propriety, "pull its 'air."

He waited hopefully, but the well-bred Miss Mudge, manifesting no signs of any intention to follow his advice, acted upon it himself. His min-

istrations, at first gentle, increased in power. Joe winced.

"You 'ave got strong fingers, miss," he said in tones of soft reproach. "You're making my eyes fair water."

"Well, why don't you take that fat 'ead of yours away then?" inquired the delighted Bill. "She's not wot you could call hurting of you."

He took a firmer grip, and a groan of anguish broke from the unfortunate Joe. "Here, easy on, my dear," he exclaimed, reaching up. "You don't know the strength of them pretty little fingers of yours. You've got—BILL! s'welp me, you do that agin, and I'll knock your ugly face off of you."

He sprang to his feet so suddenly that the conscience-stricken Bill went over backwards into the boat, half taking his fair companion with him. Placed on an even keel by the strong arm of Tom she manifested no gratitude, and, after giving herself an angry shake, started off along the beach, followed at a respectful distance by four distressed sailormen.

In the meantime Knight, having drawn blank on the beach, had turned inland. His canvas shoes made no noise as he strode on, glancing right and left until, beyond a little group of coco-palms, he found what he sought. Side by side they stood,

looking out to sea, and the intruder noticed with gratified astonishment that Carstairs' arm was placed in a comfortable fashion around his companion's waist. For a few seconds Knight gazed his fill and then, with a faint cough, blew them a yard apart.

"Knight!" cried Carstairs in amazement.

"How do you do," said Knight blandly, as he bowed to Lady Penrose. "I have come to beg you to return to the ship."

"Return to the ship!" repeated the bewildered Carstairs.

Knight nodded. "Everything is at sixes and sevens since you left us," he said slowly. "We're in a state of civil war almost. Tollhurst got up another mutiny this morning, but that's all over and Vobster is in command again. At least he was when I left, but it's quite possible by this time that Albert is in charge. Won't you come?"

"Come!" said Carstairs helplessly. *"Come!* Do you think we left the ship of our own free will?"

Knight looked puzzled. "Didn't you?" he inquired. "Wasn't it part of the arrangement?"

"What arrangement?" inquired Carstairs, in well-acted surprise.

"Why the mutiny you ordered. Wasn't that a part of it?"

"Certainly not," said Carstairs, glancing at Lady Penrose. "And what do you mean by 'the mutiny I ordered'?"

Knight smiled. "Oh, that's all right," he said airily. "I've seen your instructions to the skipper. In fact, I've got 'em. Good job they fell into such safe hands. By the way, please accept my warmest congratulations. I am delighted—delighted."

There was a long pause. "I don't know what you are talking about," said Carstairs at last.

"Talking about," repeated Knight. "Why your engagement to Lady Penrose. Everybody will be delighted when I tell them. It's a ripping—er—sequel."

"Engaged? What do you mean?" demanded Carstairs.

"Oh, sorry," said Knight coolly. "I was merely judging by appearances. I naturally thought—anybody would have thought—they will all think——"

"I forbid you to say anything about it," interrupted Lady Penrose angrily.

Knight bowed. "It is all so misleading," he murmured. "You arrange a mutiny and are set ashore under the most romantic circumstances, and, when I discover you—making the best of things——"

"That'll do," said Carstairs loudly, "and we did not arrange to be set ashore. Nobody was more

surprised that we were. It's an absolute mystery to us."

Knight sighed. "It's a censorious world, and you must admit that appearances are against you," he said gently. "It will be very difficult to convince Mrs. Jardine. She has been shaking her head off nearly; and, as for Tollhurst, he is simply raging. He got rather badly knocked about, and I'm afraid you will find it hard to give him satisfactory reasons for your little joke. After all, he is your guest, you know. What *did* you do it for?"

Carstairs made no reply.

"You're in a mess," continued Knight, "but if Lady Penrose will come to terms I think I can get you out of it. Money returned if not satisfied."

"Terms?" said Lady Penrose, regarding him scornfully.

Knight nodded. "Let me marry Winnie, and promise to do the best you can for Freddie, and I'll take the sole blame," he replied. "Nobody will have the slightest difficulty in believing me responsible for the outrage. It'll seem the most natural thing in the world to them. Otherwise——"

"No," said Lady Penrose, with sudden vehemence.

"Think it over," urged Knight. "Think of the

long voyage home with Tollhurst and Mrs. Jardine."

"*No,*" said Lady Penrose again. "Tell them what you like, and do what you like. I never thought much of you, and now I think less."

She turned to Carstairs, and, holding herself very erect, started to walk back to the tent. Knight, a shade discomfited, followed in the rear, and they walked on in silence until they came in sight of Miss Mudge and her retinue.

"Well, if you won't accept my terms," said Knight, ranging himself alongside Carstairs, "virtue shall be its own reward. I'll sacrifice myself for friendship's sake. You keep quiet and I'll do the rest."

Lady Penrose turned to Carstairs. "Don't discuss things with him," she said icily.

"The engagement," continued the unmoved Knight, "had better be kept secret for the present. And both of you try and look as disagreeable as you can."

Lady Penrose quickened her pace and walked straight towards the boat, and four sheepish mariners, touching their caps respectfully to Carstairs, pushed it into the water. With a subdued air Knight left the stern seats to the others and made his way to the bows. As the boat rounded the point and

came into view of the ship he observed, with some gratification, that his two friends were looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"No signs of uncontrollable enthusiasm," he remarked, with a cough, as they approached the yacht, and Lady Penrose shivered despite herself as she looked at the row of silent figures lining the side. She waved her hand, and her friends waved silently in reply. The line arranged itself into a little group as she passed up the accommodation-ladder, and a babel of inquiries broke on her ears as she gained the deck; the voice of Mrs. Jardine being particularly insistent.

"Ask *him,*" shouted Carstairs, levelling a trembling forefinger at Knight, who was coming slowly up the ladder.

"*Eh!*" said Tollhurst and Talwyn together with extraordinary emphasis.

Knight paused at the head of the ladder and smiled guiltily. "Just a little joke of mine," he explained, "to relieve the tedium of the voyage."

"Joke!" exclaimed Mrs. Jardine, breaking an amazed silence. She turned suddenly upon Pope. "Why, you told us——" she began.

"I misled him," interrupted Knight. "At least, I told him to prepare you for a little surprise. It was a little surprise, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Jardine drew herself up and stood regarding him in speechless indignation, but in the hubbub that ensued her temporary loss of voice was not noticed.

"Most extraordinary behaviour," said Talwyn. "Was it by your orders that I was hustled about the deck, and that one of the seamen put his dirty fist beneath my nose and told me to smell it? Eh?"

"And that I was knocked about and locked up in my cabin?" vociferated Tollhurst, regarding him fiercely.

"Mere animal spirits," said Knight. "Only their fun."

"Fun!" repeated Tollhurst in a choking voice. "What are you going to do about it, Carstairs?" he demanded.

Carstairs shrugged his shoulders. "What can I do?" he inquired. "I can't have him thrown overboard. Better leave him to his conscience—if he's got any. I suppose we ought to be thankful that nobody is really hurt."

"Not his fault," said Maloney in a deep voice, with a side glance at the culprit. "If you're not careful it's an undertaker you'll be wanting aboard instead of a doctor. He's not safe to be at large."

"Let us hope he is ashamed of himself," said Miss Flack piously.

It seemed to be an absurd hope, and Mrs. Jardine said so plainly. In the midst of a discussion, inaugurated by Talwyn as to whether it would be possible for Vobster to confine the offender to his cabin for the remainder of the voyage, Knight thrust his hands in his pockets and sauntered off below.

His appearance at the dinner-table was the signal for a sudden lull in the conversation, a state of affairs which by no means affected his appetite. When towards the end of the meal he raised his glass and proposed "Sweethearts and Wives" Mrs. Jardine arose and, with a lingering glance at the savoury which had just been placed before her, left the table.

He had the grace, however, to stay on board next day while the rest of the party paid a visit to the island; a piece of self-sacrifice which enabled him to compare notes with Captain Vobster and put things on a ship-shape and proper footing. Mr. Biggs, somewhat scared at the result of his handiwork, also came in for a little instruction.

The *Starlight* sailed from the island next day, and the ordinary routine was resumed. The days passed uneventfully, and Knight, left to himself, was observed to be making himself agreeable to various members of the crew, a circumstance which caused Mrs. Jardine and Miss Flack no little uneasiness.

They even voiced their fears to Carstairs, and that gentleman, a little conscience-stricken, approached the sufferer as he sat smoking on deck that evening after dinner with a view of cheering him up.

"*S.s.s.s!*" hissed Knight. "Go away."

"I thought——" began the other mildly.

"I know," said Knight. "They all think. That's the worst of being popular. I can hardly keep Freddie and the others off. As for Mrs. Ginnell I had to pinch her yesterday."

Carstairs stared at him. "Lady Penrose thinks——" he said.

"I know," interrupted the other. "That's what I want her to do. Now go away, there's a good chap. Leave me to pay the penalty of her misdeeds. If she's got any conscience at all——"

A grin of enlightenment dawned on Carstairs' face. "You young——" he began.

"Go away," said Knight, with dignity.

The thoughts of Lady Penrose materialised two evenings later. She came out of the lighted drawing-room and, peering through the darkness, made her way to the lonely figure that sat amidships smoking, and, after a moment's hesitation, sat down beside it.

"It's very good of you," she said, after a pause.

"Not at all," replied the truthful Knight.

There was another pause. "I think you have behaved very well," she said slowly. "Much better than I thought you could."

"We all make mistakes," said Knight ambiguously.

There was another silence, so long that he began to feel uneasy.

"I think, perhaps, I have misjudged you a little," she said at last, "and—and—if Winnie still wishes to marry you, she may."

Knight took her hand and raised it respectfully to his lips. "Thank you very much," he said gratefully. "I am very glad to think that my opinion of you has been justified."

THE END.

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